

Insights from Ancient Indian Education: Fostering Skills and Values for Holistic Development

Dr. Seema R.¹, Dr. Tumpha Deb²

¹Assistant Professor, DESM, North East Regional Institute of Education (NERIE, NCERT), Shillong.

²Guest faculty, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong

Abstract

The purpose of education is to protect and nurture a child's mind and not mere academic excellence. Moreover, in the present scenario, education should aim to prepare a child for life through accomplishment of an intelligent, self-disciplined and resilient mind. Several research studies have highlighted the need of enriching the quality of education system. Considering the mental, physical and emotional well-being of students, New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is targeting on holistic development by imparting 21st century skills in each learner which a major role in witnessing an era of intense global transformation. Ancient Indian education system (AIES) involved the best teaching learning practices and stands globally high and noble which aimed on cultivation of character, personality development since it was skill and value based. Therefore, this paper aims to revisit some of the major teaching learning practices of ancient Indian educational system that could be focused for imbibing life skills and values considering the practical applicability to improve the quality of present educational system.

Key words: Holistic development, Ancient Indian Education System (AIES), NEP 2020, 21st-century skills, resilience

Introduction

Education needless to say, is not only acquiring knowledge about some symbols, facts and information it is much more to that (Shukla, Shaida, & Safaya, 2005). The perspective of education is broader and whose clarity can be found mainly from the Ancient Indian Educational System. Ancient Indian education system (AIES) is one of the biggest and well-known systems in the world for its diverse, vast and best teaching learning practices that guided and encouraged humanity. The process and approaches adopted during the Ancient Indian educational system was very broad and it was not just about acquiring mere literacy. In ancient period, education was meaningful, noble and training for overall development of individual and formation of character was significant part of education. During that period, education was student centric which find its relevance to the modern educational system, and the teaching learning process during that period was very practical and related to life. Some important practice of teaching learning processes of ancient educational system emphasized more on formation of character, developing skills, development of civic responsibilities and social

Published: 10 February 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i2.45530>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

values (Chong & Cheah 2009). The system focused not only on intellectual and physical development but also on moral and spiritual aspects of life. It emphasized on all round development of students, shaping their lives to face the challenges of life and empowering them towards holistic progress. Therefore, this paper aims to revisit ancient Indian educational system to imbibe some important teaching learning practice of that period to improve the quality of present educational system. Moreover, the implementation of NEP 2020 is also ensuring holistic development by equipping the students with the 21st century skills.

Children when grows up hardly remembers the scores or grades obtained by him in different classes, rather they do remember the incidents and experiences that they had in their school life. This is because of the fact that the experience gained by them inculcates various skills and values which in turn empower them to live there life successfully. Therefore, skill-based education seeks great importance right from ancient times to 21st century. Ancient education systems, particularly those rooted in traditions like Vedanta, offer timeless principles that remain highly relevant today. Their emphasis on holistic learning integrating intellectual, ethical, and experiential dimension can enrich modern education. Hence this paper is trying to highlight some of the major good practices of ancient education system that could be emphasized more upon for enabling the empowerment of students with 21st century skills towards holistic development. Considering the practicality and applicability, some of these best practices could be identified and blended with the current system of education. As in ancient times, providing skill and value-based teaching learning experiences, need to be emphasized more upon for enabling the execution of 21st century skills to ensure quality education towards holistic progress as per NEP 2020.

Although several studies have highlighted the significance of 21st-century skills and holistic education under NEP 2020, most research focuses on modern educational frameworks, skill acquisition, or historical descriptions of the Ancient Indian Education System (AIES) in isolation. There is limited scholarly work that critically analyzes how AIES pedagogical practices—such as Shravana, Manana, Nididhyasana, character cultivation, mentorship, and experiential learning—can be systematically mapped to contemporary 21st-century skills for practical application in current curricula. Existing literature often emphasizes the historical or philosophical value of AIES without demonstrating actionable links to modern educational goals, leaving a gap in conceptual frameworks that integrate ancient wisdom with skill-based, holistic learning. This study addresses this gap by providing an analytical mapping of AIES practices to literacy, learning, and life skills, thereby offering both theoretical insights and practical strategies for enhancing student development and holistic education in the modern context.

Review of Literature

The ancient Indian education system has been widely acknowledged for its holistic approach to the development of learners, emphasizing the balanced cultivation of moral values, practical skills, and intellectual growth. Scholars highlight that education during the Vedic and post-Vedic periods was not merely instructional but transformative, aiming at character formation and self-realization (Chouhan, 2016; Kumari, 2017). Central to ancient Indian education was the Gurukul system, where students lived with their teachers and learned through

close personal interaction. This system fostered values such as discipline, humility, respect for elders, self-control, and social responsibility (Guha & Sudha, 2016; NCERT, 2022). Education was deeply rooted in ethical teachings drawn from the Vedas, Upanishads, epics, and Dharmashastras, integrating spiritual wisdom with daily life skills (Indian Educational System: An Overview, 2015). Several studies emphasize that ancient education focused on life skills alongside knowledge acquisition. Skills related to critical thinking, debate, memorization, observation, vocational competence, and problem-solving were integral to the curriculum (Ghonge et al., 2021; Yadav, 2018). Subjects such as astronomy, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, warfare, arts, and crafts prepared learners for both personal and societal roles (Kumar, 2019). Karisetty et al. (2020) further note that ancient education also addressed physical and mental well-being through yoga and meditation, promoting emotional balance and resilience. Comparative analyses suggest that many competencies emphasized in ancient Indian education align closely with modern 21st-century skills, such as self-discipline, collaboration, adaptability, and ethical decision-making (CBSE, 2020; Chong & Cheah, 2009). While contemporary education systems often prioritize cognitive outcomes, ancient practices placed equal importance on values education, viewing knowledge without morality as incomplete (Shukla et al., 2005).

Overall, the literature consistently portrays the ancient Indian education system as value-centric and skill-oriented, designed to nurture socially responsible, morally grounded, and competent individuals. This integrated approach continues to offer relevant insights for strengthening value and skill development in present-day educational frameworks (Cheney et al., 2005; Singh, 2020).

Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative, conceptual, and analytical approach to examine the relevance of the Ancient Indian Education System (AIES) for fostering life skills and holistic development under NEP 2020. The core pedagogical practices of Ancient Indian Education System (AIES) were identified thematically mapped aligned with contemporary the specific 21st century skills enabling a critical reinterpretation of traditional pedagogy through a modern educational lens. The approach emphasizes interpretive analysis, highlighting potential integration of AIES principles into current curricula to support holistic development, ethical growth, and life skills acquisition. The methodological focus is on the identification of convergences between traditional educational wisdom and contemporary educational goals. This approach supports the exploration of how selected elements of AIES can be meaningfully integrated into present-day education systems to strengthen holistic development and life skills as envisioned in NEP 2020.

Ancient Indian Education System (AIES)

The core objective of ancient Indian Education system was on listening, reflecting, and application of knowledge, pious way of life, imparting skill and value-based knowledge and complete learning of inner and outer self. Importance of time, role of discipline, understanding the nature and life were also some of the key aspects of the ancient times and seek great importance in the present scenario. The objectives of ancient Indian education system were

attainment of highest knowledge and self realization and for achieving these objectives they followed certain teaching learning process which were very unique to that period itself and which if imbibed in the current educational system it can bring development and can improve the educational system. Some of those important practices of teaching learning process during ancient period are mentioned below:

1. The teaching learning process

The three Vedantic stages of learning processes in the ancient educational system are *Shravana*, *Manana* and *Nididhyasana* which were regarded as the three pillars of educational practice (Yadav, 2018; Kumar, 2019) and acts as a profound framework for educational transformation. *Shravana* (listening or receiving knowledge), *Manana* (reflection and critical inquiry), and *Nididhyasana* (application and internalization) together form the three foundational stages of Vedantic learning. As a framework, they transform education from passive information intake into lived understanding, fostering critical thinking and deep, sustained, and personally meaningful engagement with subject matter. The teaching learning process was mostly oral, *Shravana*, where the students were supposed to listen attentively, receive the knowledge and understand, and not mere hearing. *Manana*, where the students will be involved in assimilating the knowledge, questioning on the same for reflecting to critically inquire. *Nididhyasana*, the students now apply and internalize the learned true knowledge through self- reflection and self-realization.

Shravana (chanting of mantras), which is also called as rote memory and which is degraded in modern educational system has broader perspectives and implications during ancient period educational system. During that period, the focus on memory or *shravana* in education means not only memorizing the verses but to correctly pronounce the words, *pada* or even letters and also listening and understanding what is learned. The contemplation and comprehension of what is learned was more important than just merely memorizing the words. The involvement of students in this process made them mentally alert and active. The students not only learned correct pronunciation of words but at the same time they tried to understand the meaning of what is learned by them.



Manana which means reflection of what is learned also find important place in ancient educational system. During that period, the students used to reflect their own learning. They after repeatedly listening to their Guru used to think again and again what they heard from their Guru and used to reflect on how those teachings are important for them and what are the things not needed for them for their future life. In modern educational system we hardly find this system to be practiced by our students. The focus of students these days is more on getting good scores and not on understanding what they are learning and how to reflect those learning in their day to day life. They learn but they don't reflect their own learning and as a result although students score high in their academics but find difficulty to get adjusted with the real world. This teaching learning process if practiced by the students in the present educational system it would bring important change and they would be more successful.

Niddhiyasana means contemplation of truth and controlling of sense organs. One can attain this stage only when one has adopted Shravana and Manana and attained mastery in that. *Niddhiyasana* is having complete control of self. It means complete understanding of self; one's own merits and demerits and criticizing those for better improvement of oneself. In the ancient period to attained *Niddhiyasana* students used to have meditation in their daily routine and hence the students found to be less depressive and maladaptive and after completion of their education also when they go back to their family life, they lead a normal life. In the modern education system, we found no such concept of *Niddhiyasana* the students received no teaching on self control or controlling of sense organs and as a result every year we get reports on children committing suicide, having depression, stress and many other psycho-somatic disorders. Practices such as *Sravana* (listening), *Manana* (reflection), and *Nididhyasana* (application) align well with contemporary needs for critical thinking, self-directed learning, and real-world application. By incorporating dialogue-based teaching, reflective practices, mentorship, and experiential learning, modern education can move beyond rote memorization toward deeper understanding, personal growth, and lifelong learning. In fact, these teaching learning processes if adopted in the modern educational system can help to bring solutions of many problems.

2. Character cultivation

The second important teaching learning practice which was followed during Ancient Indian education system was character formation. During that period, there was a belief a man of good character can lead a successful life and therefore they trained their students for building good character. The students during those times used to live with their *Guru* and had to adhere to the rules and regulations of the *Gurukula*. They were expected to live a sacred life and they were not allowed to indulge in any intoxicants and other bad habits. Thus this way they were trained to have control over their senses and to become a man of character and not only repository of knowledge (Ghonge, Bag, & Singh, 2021), but in the present time, we can hardly find these practices in educational system and the root of imbibing such education in our young children is lost.

3. Cordial student -teacher relationship and teaching learning environment

Gurukul system of education is a tradition prevailed in the ancient times where the pupil resides along with the teacher (*guru*), and does all kind of assigned tasks along with the classes (Singh, 2020). The teacher (*guru*) was considered as a good ideal and the students hold a strong and emotional bonding with the teacher. Knowledge was imparted with lot of love and patience. This aided natural imbibitions of skills and values, by constant direct observation of the teacher and simulation. Also, unconditional relationship with the students helped in imparting moral values. The classes were held in open spaces in a calm and peaceful ambiance. This created a stress free atmosphere leading to better learning.



Fig 1.: Gurukul System. Ref: <https://vediconcepts.org/gurukul-education-system/>

4. Interactive learning

Students were mostly involved in discussions, dialogues, debates, collaborative learning, and peer learning. They were involved in frequent interactions and well trained in learned debates. This created opportunities to explore more and to develop interpersonal relationship. The healthy debates and discussions helped them to imbibe patience, tolerance and empathy.

5. Skill based learning

In the ancient times more emphasis was on practical knowledge than theoretical. The knowledge was correlated with the nature and life and they were exposed to vast practical experiences and skills. The teacher adopted a trans disciplinary approach were the knowledge was imparted as a whole dissolving the boundaries of conventional disciplines and the learned knowledge was practically implemented to solve real life problems. Teaching and learning was more process oriented and the students were not assessed for being ranked. Rather they were made to realize once own inner potential through rigorous hard work. Prominence was given on both outer and inner dimensions of each discipline.

6. Self-reflection and Self-discipline

Inculcation of personality traits like self confidence and self-esteem was on priority in the ancient times. Students were given lot of opportunities for self -learning and were trained to reflect on their own learning experience which in turn enhanced freedom of thought. They were made to adhere to a system of routines for maintaining their mental, physical and emotional health. Self reflection was an opportunity to rethink on their own thoughts to enhance their understanding their strength and weaknesses which is very important for holistic development.

7. Self and civic responsibility, value inculcation and social service

Different task-based learning in was the AIES to make the students more self responsible and open minded to face issues and challenges on their own. After formal education the students involved in many social activities and exhibited high hospitality to the society and were charitable to the needy.

21st century skills: components

21st century skills refer to a set of skills which are critically important to succeed in life and are required to enable us to face the challenges of 21st century world. Considering the historical background and development of 21st century skills from Delor's report (1996), Wagner (2010) to UNESCO working paper (2015), they can be broadly grouped in to three sets skills: Literacy skills, Learning skills and Life skills.

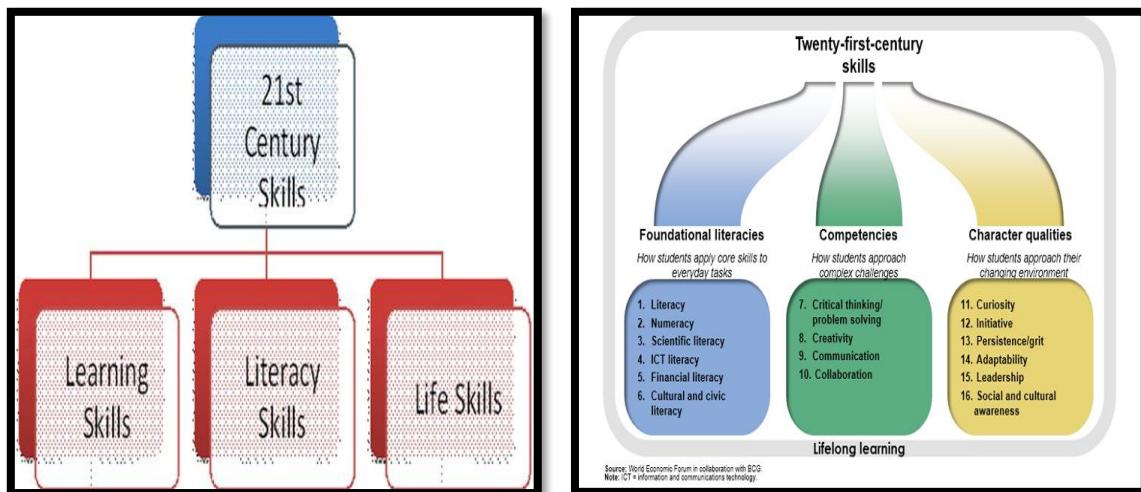


Fig 1. List of 21st century skills (Source: Hand book, CBSE 2020)

Literacy skills include gaining knowledge through reading, writing and digital resources. Learning skills include critical thinking, communication, creativity and collaboration. Life skills include flexibility, adaptability, responsibility, accountability, leadership and social skills. NEP 2020 has enlisted these skills in detail under the headings foundational literacy, Competencies and Character qualities. AIES always intended to provide quality manpower to the society through skill and value-based education **Fig 1**. The current education system needs to absorb some of the pedagogical practices, methodology or ideas followed by the ancient education system considering the possibility and applicability. Those could be adopted and implementation can really ease the inculcation of majority of the 21st century skills. Considering the practicality and applicability in the current system, some of the best practices of the ancient Indian education system if practiced and utilized effectively, can assist us in equipping 21st century skills among the students to make them resilient. The major areas which could be emphasized are listed in **table 1**.

S. No.	AIES Practices	Attitudes and Values	21st-Century Skills
1.	<i>Sravana</i> - Listening and understanding	Creative imagination, patience, empathy	Creativity, critical thinking

2.	<i>Manana</i> : Self-Questioning, Group discussions	Tolerance, empathy	Curiosity, communication, collaboration
3.	<i>Nidyaasana</i> - Comprehension, Realization of the facts/ truth	Self-reflection, metacognition, honesty	Critical thinking, learning to learn, flexibility
4.	Student teacher relationship	Unconditional regard, empathy, Caring concern	Interpersonal relationship, persistence
5.	Teaching environment	Fear free classroom, Freedom of thought, Open mindedness	Creativity, collaboration, persistence
6.	Interactive learning	Confidence, discipline, respect, empathy	Collaboration, communication, interpersonal relationship
7.	Skill centric approach (formal and informal education)	Problem solving, personality development	Creativity, innovation
8.	Civic and Social responsibility (Leadership)	Social awareness, social ethics sympathy, empathy	Initiative, productivity and accountability
9.	Self- discipline & self-realization	Honesty, self-awareness, metacognition, self-confidence, self esteem	Flexibility and adaptability

Table 1: Correlation of AIES with 21st century skills

Pedagogical strategies

The selective use of pedagogical strategies such as storytelling, experiential learning, mentorship, dialogue, and value-integrated instruction is highly relevant in contemporary education because these approaches reflect the core principles of ancient educational systems while addressing modern learning needs. Storytelling helps preserve cultural heritage and moral teachings by conveying values like truth, duty, and compassion in an engaging and memorable way. Experiential learning promotes learning by doing, enabling students to acquire practical skills, self-reliance, and problem-solving abilities, which were central to ancient education. Mentorship, inspired by the guru–shishya tradition, fosters close teacher–student relationships that support character formation, discipline, and personalized guidance. Dialogic methods, such as discussions and debates, encourage inquiry, reflection, and critical thinking, allowing learners to internalize knowledge rather than memorize it. Value-integrated

instruction ensures that ethical principles are embedded across subjects, helping students connect academic learning with real-life moral and social responsibilities.

S. No.	Pedagogical strategies
1.	Storytelling and toy-based pedagogy - Using epics, parables, and moral stories to transmit values such as truth, duty, and compassion.
2.	Mentoring- Close teacher-student interaction to promote student teacher relationship, mutual understanding, character building, respect, and personalized learning.
3.	Experiential Learning - Learning through real practice, observation, and real-life experiences to develop curiosity, self-confidence, self-reliance and practical skills.
4.	Value Integration Across Subjects – Embedding values and dispositions within all subjects
5.	Service-Based Learning – Community service to develop a sense of social responsibility and empathy.
6.	Yoga and Meditation– Practices like yoga and meditation to enhance concentration, discipline, self-awareness and mental health
7.	Eco friendly and sustainable Learning – Learning in harmony with nature to cultivate environmental awareness and simplicity.

These strategies emphasize experience, reflection, and human interaction, thereby bridging ancient wisdom with modern educational practices. As a result, they contribute to the holistic development of learners by nurturing intellectual growth alongside emotional balance, cultural awareness, and ethical responsibility, preparing individuals to become socially responsible and morally grounded members of society. These strategies will also help in preserving ancient educational values while fostering balanced intellectual, moral, and social development.

Integrating the practices of the Ancient Indian Education System (AIES) into the present significantly enhance holistic development by nurturing students' cognitive, emotional, ethical, and social growth. The emphasis of NEP 2020 on 21st-century skills—such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and life skills—aligns naturally with the core principles of AIES, highlighting the enduring relevance of ancient pedagogical wisdom. By moving beyond rote memorization, contemporary education can adopt reflective, application-oriented, and skill-based approaches that foster deeper understanding and personal growth. Implementing strategies such as mentorship, dialogue, experiential learning, and value integration can effectively address pressing challenges in today's classrooms, including student stress, lack of empathy, and limited self-regulation, while cultivating responsible, resilient, and well-rounded individuals.

Conclusion

The commercialization of the education sector in today's world is really a threat to society. Child's real potential is being neglected during the race of completing the curriculum. Moreover, due to several reasons, many research studies have proved that the ethical value structure of Indian education system is declining and there is an intense requirement of educational transformation in the present. Hence NEP 2020 is focusing on holistic development by developing 21st century skills to prepare a child for life through accomplishment of an intelligent, self- disciplined and resilient mind. Ancient Indian education system is one of the biggest and well-known systems in the world for its diverse, vast and best teaching learning practices that guided and encouraged humanity. Considering the practicality and applicability, some of these best practices could be identified and blended with the current system of education. As in ancient times, providing skill and value-based teaching learning experiences, need to be emphasized more upon for enabling the execution of 21st century skills to ensure quality education towards holistic progress as per NEP 2020.

References

1. Central Board of Secondary Education. (2020). *21st century skills: A handbook*. CBSE.
2. Cheney, G. R., Ruzzi, B. B., & Muralidharan, K. (2005). *A profile of the Indian education system*. National Centre on Education and the Economy.
3. Chong, S., & Cheah, H. M. (2009). A values, skills and knowledge framework for initial teacher preparation programmes. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(3), 1–17.
4. Chouhan, K. (2016). Education system in ancient India. *International Journal of History and Research*, 6(2), 1–4.
5. Ghonge, M. M., Bag, R., & Singh, A. (2021). Indian education: Ancient, medieval and modern. In S. Waller, L. Waller, V. Mpofu, & M. Kurebwa (Eds.), *Education at the intersection of globalization and technology* (pp. 1–240). Springer.
6. Guha, S., & Sudha, A. (2016). Origin and history of value education in India: Understanding the ancient Indian educational system. *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, 6(3), 109–111.
7. Indian educational system: An overview of the ancient Indian education. (2015). Semantic Scholar.
<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Indian-Educational-System-%3A-An-Overview-of-the/efd3370cb7cdad525bf81f688f42a3490bb93506>
8. Karisetty, R., Shivanna, S., Pradhan, B., Srinivasan, T., & Bhat, R. (2020). A comparative study between Vedic and contemporary education systems using bio-energy markers. *International Journal of Yoga*, 13(1), 1–6.
9. Kumar, R. (2019). A brief history of Indian education system. *International Journal of Applied Social Science*, 6(2), 224–229.
10. Kumari, P. (2017). Education system in Vedic period. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 4(6), 620–623.

11. National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2022). *Ancient educational system of India*. <https://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/heih111.pdf>
12. Shukla, C., Shaida, B., & Safaya, R. (2005). *Teacher in the emerging Indian society*. Dhanpat Rai Publishing Company.
13. Singh, B. (2020). *Comparative analysis of government and private schools at elementary level: A study of Haryana state* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Chaudhary Devi Lal University.
14. Yadav, U. (2018). A comparative study of ancient and present educational system. *Education, Sustainability and Society*, 1(1), 1–3.