

# Spiritual teaching under the National Education Policy 2020: with special reference to Educational Institutions in Assam

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***Abstract***—In India, including Assam, spiritual teaching serves not as religious instruction but as a holistic, value-oriented pedagogical approach aimed at nurturing humanistic and constitutional values, emotional intelligence, ethical sensitivity, and a deeper sense of purpose among learners. It moves beyond a purely materialistic and examination-driven model of education to foster the development of well-rounded, socially responsible, and morally grounded individuals. Value-based approach had fosters human and constitutional values with emotional intelligence and a sense of purpose.

This paper had examines how the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes students' spiritual growth through curricular activities, while promoting rootedness in Indian heritage via Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) such as yoga and meditation as instrument for character building. Along with that it specifically going to highlights the pivotal role of Assam's educational institutions, including- SCERT, universities and colleges in leading NEP implementation through experiential learning programs, teacher training, and culturally responsive curricula as transformative mechanisms in operationalizing the policy at the regional level.

The study will draws on secondary data from books, peer-reviewed journals, government policy documents, and articles on NEP 2020, IKS, and Assam's educational reforms.

***Index Terms***—NEP 2020, spiritual education, Indian Knowledge Systems, holistic development, Assam educational institutions, character building.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education has always been about questions of meaning, purpose and personal development. The transmission of knowledge in the history of the civilizations was not only intellectual, but at the

same time ethical, aesthetic and spiritual. In India, this understanding was perhaps most richly articulated in the ancient Gurukula tradition, where the *Guru-Shishya* (teacher-student) relationship encompassed the formation of character as much as the acquisition of skill or information. The Vedic injunction *Sa vidya ya vimuktaye* (knowledge is that which liberates) tries to capture an educational philosophy, but modern educational institutions have largely favored utilitarian and examination-driven goals.

The National Education Policy 2020, unveiled by the Government of India after more than three decades since the last major policy revision, attempts a significant course correction. Its preamble envisions an education system “rooted in Indian ethos that contributes directly to transforming India, that is, Bharat, sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledgeable society, by providing high-quality education to all, and thereby making India a globally superpower nation in the education sector.” Embedded within this vision is a renewed commitment to value education, ethical formation, and what the policy terms the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), a vast repository that includes not only empirical and philosophical knowledge but also spiritual traditions.

Assam, situated at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asian civilizations, occupies a unique place in India's spiritual and cultural geography. It is the home of Srimanta Sankardeva, a 15th–16th-century saint and thinker whose neo-Vaishnavite movement, organized through the institutions of Satras and Namghars, greatly influenced Assamese identity, art, literature, and community life. Alongside this, Assam is home to a remarkable diversity of tribal communities like Bodo, Mising, Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, and others, each carrying distinctive spiritual worldviews that integrate ecology, ancestry, and the cosmos into daily life. Then there are Sufi traditions, folk shamanism, goddess worship at Kamakhya and the syncretic cultures of the Brahmaputra valley. This research paper analyses the focus of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on spiritual development of students through curricular activities and promotion of Indian heritage through Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) including yoga and meditation as tools for character formation. It looks at how educational institutions in Assam are dealing with this opportunity in a pedagogically sound, culturally respectful and constitutionally appropriate manner. It also highlighted the role of educational institutions in Assam, including SCERT, universities, and colleges, in operationalizing NEP through experiential learning programs, teacher training, and culturally responsive curricula as transformative strategies for implementing the policy at the regional level.

## II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DEFINING SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

Any serious attempt to think about spiritual education in a pluralist, secular democracy has to begin with a distinction between spirituality and religion. Religion typically refers to highly organized systems of belief, ritual, community, and theological doctrine that are associated with specific historical traditions. Spirituality, on the other hand, is a broader and more personal, and

often cross-cultural, dimension of the human experience that deals with questions of ultimate meaning, inner depth, interconnection and transcendence.

The 1996 Delors Report published by UNESCO introduced the concept of “learning to be” as one of the four pillars of education, recognizing the inner dimension of human development that goes beyond cognitive skill and occupational preparation. More recently, scholars like Yakov Iram, Ron Miller and Nel Noddings have argued that education must address the existential and relational dimensions of human life, what might be called the spiritual domain, that need to be truly cultivated among human beings. Miller (2005) The interface of spirituality with religion is undoubtedly complex in the Indian context. Indian philosophical traditions (Vedanta, Yoga, Tantra, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism) tend to develop spirituality within religious paradigms, yet also articulate universally applicable insights. The task of public education is to draw upon the wisdom found in these traditions, without giving any one religion or community a special status.

### Key Dimensions of Spiritual Education

Spiritual education is understood to encompass:

1. Inner cultivation: practices and experiences that foster self-awareness, emotional regulation, mindfulness, and moral reflection.
2. Cultivation of virtues like compassion, integrity, humility, gratitude and service values that transcend various philosophical and religious traditions.
3. Relational and ecological awareness: An understanding of being in relation to other human beings, non-human life and the natural environment that results in responsible and caring behavior.
4. Aesthetic and cultural transmission: Spiritual understanding via engagement in sacred arts, music, dance, storytelling and pilgrimage.
5. Contemplative pedagogy: Pedagogy that incorporates silence, meditation, reflective journaling, dialogue, and embodied practice as adjuncts to analytical instruction.

### III. NEP 2020: CREATING SPACE FOR SPIRITUAL TEACHING

NEP 2020 embodies a holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary approach to education rooted in Indian ethos. Its core values are critical thinking, creativity, ethical reasoning, cultural pride and concern for others and the environment. The policy explicitly rejects the narrow, examination-obsessed approach of previous decades and calls for the development of “excellent human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy, courage and resilience, scientific temper, and creative imagination.”

These aspirations are intrinsically connected to what might be understood as a spiritual vision of education. The focus on character development, empathy, service and inner strength is consistent with spiritual and contemplative teaching methods used around the world. The explicit mention of Indian Knowledge Systems as a resource to develop curriculum opens way for the rich philosophical and spiritual heritage of the subcontinent.

Specific Provisions Relating to Spiritual Teachings NEP 2020 mandates the integration of ethics and values at all levels of education. It requires the integration of activities on “seva” (selfless service), “ahimsa” (non-violence), “satyagraha” (truth) and “karuna” (compassion) through the curriculum. The policy refers to the Pancha Kosha (five sheaths) model of Indian philosophy as a framework for holistic development of physical, vital, mental, intellectual and blissful dimensions of human person. One of the most important innovations of NEP 2020 was the establishment of the Indian Knowledge System as a legitimate and valued epistemic domain. The policy calls for the “integration of IKS, including tribal knowledge and indigenous knowledge, in curriculum and pedagogy.” This provision encompasses philosophy, mathematics, science, and arts, as well as spiritual teaching with contemplative traditions. The newly established IKS Division under the Ministry of Education has as its main tasks the development of curriculum materials, teacher training modules, and research programs in educational institutions or the domain that covers IKS. Delors (1996)

Along with IKS, NEP 2020 also strongly promotes mother-tongue instruction, particularly at the foundational stage of the students at educational institutions. In Assam, this provision has profound implications, like spiritual literature, oral traditions, devotional songs (*Borgeets*), and folk tales that carry spiritual wisdom that are most accessible and impactful in regional languages such as Assamese, Bodo, Mising, and Karbi. The policy’s emphasis on multilingualism provides structural support for the transmission of region-specific spiritual knowledge. Thakur (2017) The policy recommends that schools include arts, crafts and cultural practices in their curricula, as they are considered vehicles of creativity, heritage and human flourishing. In Assam, sacred arts such as *Sattriya dance*, *Ankia Naat* (one-act plays), *Bhaona* (devotional drama), and traditional handicrafts associated with Satra life are not merely aesthetic forms, but they are spiritual practices with deep educational potential.

Another objective of NEP 2020 was specifically to include yoga as part of physical education and holistic well-being programs. Yoga, understood in its classical sense (beyond mere physical postures), encompasses ethical disciplines (yamas and niyamas), breath regulation (pranayama), sense withdrawal (pratyahara), concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana), and integration (samadhi). If it is integrated into school timetables, it will provide a direct institutional entry point for contemplative and spiritual practice. IKS (2022)

The policy emphasizes “local context” and “community engagement” in the design and implementation of the curriculum. It asks schools to collaborate with local artisans, artists, community leaders and knowledge holders. This provision can open doors for inviting Satra Satradhikars (heads), tribal knowledge keepers, Namghar secretaries and Sufi masters as resource persons in educational spaces in Assam.

#### IV. ASSAM'S SPIRITUAL HERITAGE: A RESOURCE FOR EDUCATION

Greatest architect of Assamese cultural and spiritual identity, is widely considered Srimanta Sankardeva (1449–1568). His neo-Vaishnavite movement, the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma

(Shelter-in-One Religion), was an extraordinary feat of inclusive spiritual pedagogy. Sankardeva's philosophy centered on devotion (bhakti) to one formless God, universal brotherhood, rejection of caste hierarchy and cultivation of inner transformation through nama-kirtan (collective chanting), dramatic performance and scriptural study. Barua (2003)

His educational insights were institutionalized through two remarkable innovations. The Satra, a monastic institution that served simultaneously as a center of worship, artistic production, social service, and education, was the cornerstone of Assamese community life. The Namghar, a community prayer hall attached to each village, became a democratic space for collective learning, deliberation, and cultural transmission. These institutions still exist as living realities across Assam today with over 900 Satras and thousands of Namghars continuing to function till today. Barthakur (2018) Barua (2003) The educational philosophy of Sankardeva, in its fusion of art and spirituality, its preoccupation with the role of community in education, the significance of vernacular languages and the primacy of inner transformation over external performance, anticipated many themes of contemporary holistic education. His Borgeets (devotional compositions), Ankia Naat plays and his translations of Sanskrit scriptures into Assamese created a powerful vernacular knowledge both spiritual and educational. Barua (2003), Barthakur (2018).

#### Tribal Spiritual Traditions

Assam is home to a remarkable diversity of tribal communities, each with rich spiritual traditions that embody sophisticated ecological, ethical, and cosmological knowledge. The Bodo people follow Bathouism, a nature-based spirituality that symbolizes the divine with the Sijou plant and is rich in oral literature, music and ritual that contain ecological wisdom. The complex animist spirituality of the Mising of Assam and Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh (Donyi-Polo, the sun-moon religion, now also organised as a formal movement) emphasizes respect for natural forces and ancestral wisdom. Thakur, 2017 .

Karbi, Dimasa, Rabha, and other communities similarly possess intricate spiritual worldviews transmitted through oral literature, ritual performance, sacred landscapes, and communal festivals. These traditions carry knowledge about biodiversity, sustainable resource use, inter-community relations, and psychological resilience that is directly relevant to contemporary educational goals in environmental ethics, social cohesion, and mental health. Thakur (2017), Hazarika (2019)

#### The Kamakhya Tradition and Shakti Tantrism

The Kamakhya temple complex in Guwahati is one of the most important Shakti pilgrimage sites in India that represents a living tradition of goddess worship, Tantric philosophy, and esoteric knowledge. While the more esoteric dimensions of Tantra are unsuitable for formal schooling, the Kamakhya tradition embodies important themes of female sacredness, integration of the divine and the mundane, and ecological reverence that can inform value education and gender-sensitive curriculum design. Barua (2003)

### Sufi and Islamic Spiritual Traditions

Assam has a significant Muslim population and the Sufi tradition in the region that historically emphasized love, service, and inter-community harmony. *Sufi Dargahs* in the Brahmaputra valley have long been sites of spiritual learning, music (*Qawwali* and related forms), and community healing. Incorporating the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of Sufi spirituality within a pluralistic educational framework that has contributed to the communal harmony for NEP 2020 and the broader national education framework that seeks to foster.

### Buddhist Heritage

Assam has ancient connections with Buddhism, and the Buddhist monastery in Tinsukia, the Dibrugarh district, and other archaeological sites attest to a period when Buddhist monasteries and Buddha Viharas served as major educational centers. Mulang village in Ledo, located in the Tinsukia district of Assam, is renowned for the Buddhist monastery, which is the MOUNGLANG KHAMTI Buddhist Monastery, commonly known as the International Meditation Center. It is a serene spiritual site known for its beautiful surroundings and the revered *Bhante Baba*, a monk known for providing a popular blessed stone worn by many devotees. The revival of awareness about this heritage and the incorporation of Buddhist contemplative insights (mindfulness, compassion, impermanence) offer additional resources for spiritual education.

## V. CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF SPIRITUAL EDUCATION IN ASSAM'S INSTITUTIONS

### Formal School Sector

Assam's formal school sector, comprising government schools under the Department of Elementary Education and the Axom Sarba Siksha Abhiyan Mission, private English-medium schools, and Kendriya Vidyalayas, has historically offered limited space for spiritual education. Moral science, or value education, has been part of the curriculum on paper, but its implementation has been inconsistent and often reduced to rote memorization of virtues without experiential engagement. Neog (1965) Phukon (2000)

However, several government initiatives have been taken for the introduction of yoga classes in government schools following national directives, the celebration of heritage festivals (*Bihu, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Ali-Ai-Ligang*) as school events, and occasional Satra artist visits as part of cultural programs that represent embryonic forms of spiritually informed education. The Vidya Bharati network of schools operating in Assam has more systematically incorporated Sanskrit, yoga, and value education drawn from Hindu traditions, though this approach raises important questions of inclusivity in a diverse state. Saikia (2004)

### Higher Education

Assam's universities, like Gauhati University, Dibrugarh University, Tezpur University, Assam University (Silchar), Cotton University, and the newer state universities, have departments of Philosophy and Religious Studies that engage with spiritual traditions at an academic level.

Gauhati University's Department of Philosophy offers courses in Indian Philosophy, Comparative Religion, and Vedanta that provide a scholarly foundation for spiritual education. Phukon (2000)

Cotton University, with its historic connection to Assamese cultural leadership, has been a site for scholarly engagement with Sankardeva's legacy. The Srimanta Sankardeva Kalashetra in Guwahati, while primarily a cultural complex, serves an educational function through its museums, performance spaces, and library that serve as a model for institution-community collaboration in spiritual-cultural education. Barthakur (2018)

Several theological and monastic institutions, including Satra-affiliated education centers and Madrasas, provide explicitly spiritual education within their communities, though these remain outside the mainstream formal education system.

#### Non-Governmental and Community Initiatives

A number of NGOs and community organizations in Assam have pioneered approaches to spiritual and value education that could inform broader policy. The Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, operating across Assam, runs educational programs emphasizing Vaishnavite values, *Borgeet* singing, and *Ankia Naat* performance. Tribal cultural organizations, environmental NGOs like the *Aaranyak*, and interfaith dialogue groups have developed educational materials that integrate spiritual ecology and cross-cultural wisdom. Nussbaum (2010)

## VI. CHALLENGES AND CRITICAL CONCERNS

#### Constitutional and Secular Framework

Article 28 of the Indian Constitution prohibits religious instruction in state-funded educational institutions, creating a significant legal constraint on formal spiritual education. Any curriculum development in this domain must carefully distinguish between spiritual values and religious doctrine, between contemplative practices with universal applicability and community-specific ritual observance. The challenge is to draw upon India's rich spiritual heritage without privileging any particular religious community or promoting sectarian allegiance.

#### Intellectual and Pedagogical Capacity

Implementing authentic spiritual education requires teachers who possess genuine inner formation, a philosophical understanding, and pedagogical skills in contemplative methods; however, existing teacher education programs in Assam have not been systematically developed to provide this rare combination. The lack of properly trained teachers has led to a reduction of spiritual education to superficial moralizing or ritual performance, often without a true understanding of its significance. Delors (1996)

### Infrastructure and Resource Gaps

Many schools in Assam, particularly in rural and hill areas, lack basic infrastructure, adequately trained teachers, and functional libraries. Prioritizing spiritual education in contexts where fundamental educational needs remain unmet raises serious equity concerns. Implementation strategies must be attentive to material realities and avoid becoming an elite or urban luxury.

### Assessment and Evaluation

The outcomes of spiritual education inner depth, ethical sensitivity, and compassionate action are notoriously difficult to assess through standardized examinations. Yet without some form of evaluation, integration into formal schooling is likely to remain marginal. Developing appropriate, non-reductive forms of assessment is a significant pedagogical challenge.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

### Curriculum Development

A state-level IKS Curriculum Committee, including scholars from diverse spiritual traditions represented in Assam Vaishnavite, tribal, Islamic, Buddhist, and Christian, should develop age-appropriate, culturally inclusive spiritual education modules. The curriculum should emphasize universal values, contemplative practices, sacred arts, and ecological consciousness, transcending any single tradition. The *Borgeet* corpus, tribal oral literature, Sufi poetry, and Buddhist teachings on mindfulness could all serve as textual resources.

### Teacher Education

Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs at Assam's District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) should include modules on contemplative pedagogy, the philosophy of Indian Knowledge Systems, and practical training in facilitation of values-based dialogue. Collaboration with Satras, Namghars, tribal knowledge centers, and interfaith organizations could provide authentic experiential learning for teacher trainees. SCERT (2022)

### Integration with Existing Institutions

Rather than creating parallel structures, the Satra and Namghar systems that are widely distributed across Assam could be formally recognized as community learning centers under NEP 2020's provisions for Alternative Learning Centers. Satras could offer certified programs in Sattriya arts, Borgeet singing, and Vaishnavite philosophy, with academic credit through the system of Academic Bank of Credits envisaged by NEP 2020. Ministry of Education (2021)

### Dedicated Chair and Research Centre

Universities in Assam should establish a dedicated chair for spiritual education and Indian knowledge systems, tasked with producing scholarly research, curriculum materials, teacher

education modules, and policy advisory services. These centers could collaborate with the IKS Division of the Ministry of Education and with international centers for contemplative education such as those at Naropa University (USA) and the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (UK).

#### Community Partnership Model

Schools should be encouraged to develop formal partnerships with local Satras, Namghars, tribal cultural organizations, and interfaith dialogue groups. A Community Spiritual Resource Person scheme draws attention to NEP 2020's provision for community engagement, which could bring practitioners, oral tradition bearers, sacred artists, and ethical leaders into school settings on a regular basis, not as religious instructors but as wisdom keepers and cultural educators.

#### Constitutional Safeguards

All curriculum development and implementation must be overseen by a multi-faith, multi-community advisory council that includes legal experts, constitutional scholars, civil society representatives, and parent groups. This council should review all materials to ensure compliance with Articles 25–30 of the Constitution and the secular character of public education.

### VIII. ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDIES

#### The Satra School Model: Auniati Satra, Majuli

The Auniati Satra on Majuli Island is one of the most important Vaishnavite monasteries in Assam that runs an informal educational program alongside its religious activities, teaching *Borgeet*, *Sattriya* dance, *Ankia Naat* performance, Sanskrit, and Vaishnavite philosophy to young students from surrounding communities. This model, operating for centuries, represents a living example of integrated spiritual-artistic-intellectual education. NEP 2020's provisions for vocational education and arts integration could provide a framework for formally recognizing and expanding such programs, making them accessible to students from diverse backgrounds. Neog (1965)

#### Donyi-Polo Schools: A Tribal Spiritual Education Model

The Donyi-Polo religious movement among the Adi and related communities of Arunachal Pradesh and adjacent areas of Assam has developed formal educational institutions that integrate indigenous spiritual practices, ecological knowledge, and contemporary education. These schools teach students in their mother tongue, incorporate oral literature and nature-based rituals into the curriculum, and produce graduates who are both academically competent and culturally rooted. This model offers valuable insights for spiritually sensitive education in Assam's own tribal communities. Thakur (2017)

### Gurukula Experiments in Contemporary Assam

Several private and NGO-run institutions in Assam have experimented with Gurukula-inspired education that integrates academic subjects with yoga, Sanskrit, Vedic mathematics, meditation, and ethical formation. While these experiments are small in scale and sometimes criticized for their ideological orientations, they demonstrate that the institutional imagination and community support exist for more systematically spiritually informed education. The challenge is to design programs that are inclusive, pluralistic, and pedagogically rigorous.

## IX. DISCUSSION: TOWARD AN ASSAM MODEL OF SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

The foregoing analysis suggests that the conditions for a meaningful, inclusive, and educationally robust approach to spiritual teaching in Assam's educational institutions are, in principle, favorable. NEP 2020 offers an unprecedented educational policy opportunity for Assam's spiritual heritage, while community institutions like Satras and Namghars supply the necessary infrastructure and cultural authority. The primary challenges are operational, legal, and political rather than conceptual or cultural. Bora, (2021) Government of India, (2020)

Several distinctive features would characterize a genuinely Assamese model of spiritual education. It would be pluralistic, drawing from the Vaishnavite, tribal, Islamic, Buddhist, and other spiritual traditions of the region rather than privileging any single heritage. It would be vernacular, using Assamese, Bodo, Mising, Karbi, and other regional languages as vehicles of spiritual wisdom. It would be embodied, integrating yoga, Sattriya dance, music, and the natural environment as sites of learning alongside textual study. And it would be community-rooted, treating schools as nodes in a larger web of spiritual and cultural learning that includes Satras, Namghars, festivals, pilgrimage sites, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Hazarika (2019), Bora (2021)

Such a model would not be spiritual education in the narrow sense of doctrine or ritual, but in the broader sense of an education for depth by cultivating in young people the capacity for wonder, ethical discernment, compassionate relation, creative expression, and inner resilience that the great spiritual traditions of Assam have always understood as the hallmarks of a truly educated person.

## X. CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 marks a historic opportunity to reimagine Indian education in ways that honor the full depth of the human person and the richness of India's cultural heritage. This opportunity is particularly significant for Assam, given its extraordinary spiritual diversity and its living traditions of community-based, aesthetically rich, and ethically profound spiritual formation.

The realization of this opportunity will require courage, wisdom, and collaboration: courage to insist on inclusive rather than sectarian approaches; wisdom to draw deeply from diverse

traditions without caricaturing or commercializing them; and collaboration among policymakers, scholars, practitioners, community leaders, teachers, parents, and students. It will require, in short, the kind of engaged, humble, and visionary spirit that Assam's greatest spiritual teachers, from Sankardeva to the unnamed tribal knowledge keepers who have tended the sacred forests of the Brahmaputra valley, have always exemplified.

Education in Assam has the potential to become a model for the nation: a demonstration that the ancient and the modern, the universal and the local, the cognitive and the contemplative can be woven together into a seamless cloth that clothes the next generation in wisdom, creativity, and compassion. NEP 2020 has opened the door; it now falls to Assam's educators, communities, and institutions to walk through it with purpose and grace.

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