

The Guru and the Machine: Reclaiming India's Educational Soul in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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(A civilization that once measured education by the awakening of consciousness now measures it by the coverage of a syllabus. As artificial intelligence begins to outperform the classroom at the very task the classroom prized most — the transfer of information — India is being forced to ask a question it postponed for seventy-five years: what was Indian education actually for, before we allowed someone else to define it for us?)

There is a particular kind of vertigo that visits a teacher standing before a class today. It is not the vertigo of not knowing enough. It is the vertigo of realizing that the student, phone in pocket, already has access to more information than the teacher could deliver in a lifetime of lectures. A chatbot will draft the essay. A search engine will supply the date, the formula, the definition. The examination hall, that great cathedral of Indian pedagogy, still rewards the retrieval and reproduction of facts — but the fact has become the cheapest commodity in the intellectual economy. Somewhere in the last decade, without anyone quite noticing the moment it happened, the entire premise of the classroom was quietly hollowed out.

This is not, in truth, a new crisis. It is an old one, arriving in a new costume. For a very long time, Indian education has confused two things that were never meant to be confused: the giving of information and the giving of vision. It built teachers who could transmit a syllabus with great efficiency. It forgot — or was made to forget — that its own civilizational memory held something considerably larger: the idea of the Guru, not as an instructor of subjects but as a giver of life itself. Life not in the biological sense, but in the sense of a direction, a discernment, an orientation to the world that no examination has ever tested and no algorithm can yet supply.

To understand why Indian higher education finds itself simultaneously overwhelmed by artificial intelligence and undernourished by its own philosophy, it helps to return to that older idea and ask, plainly, what has been lost — and what, even now, might still be recovered.

The Guru: A Giver of Vision, Not Information

In most of the world's major educational traditions, the figure at the front of the room has historically been called a teacher, and a teacher's brief has been reasonably modest: to impart knowledge, to build a skill, and where possible, to let that skill mature into practical experience through supervised practice. This is a perfectly respectable ambition, and Western

pedagogical thought has refined it with great sophistication. But it is not, and was never claimed to be, the same ambition that Indian thought attached to the figure of the Guru.

The Guru, in the Indian conception, is described as a seer of life — a jeevan-drishta. And what is given is not information, not even wisdom in the narrow sense, but jeevan drishti: a vision of life. This vision is not reducible to knowledge, nor to information, nor to intellect, nor even to viveka, that precious Indian category usually translated — inadequately — as "discernment." It exceeds all four categories simultaneously, which is precisely why the tradition insisted that a distinct word and a distinct social role were required to hold it. The Guru does not merely instruct the student in a subject; the Guru orients the student toward a way of being in the world.

This distinction matters more than it might first appear, because it explains why the transplantation of Western educational structures onto Indian soil, without the accompanying transplantation of Western educational purpose, produced a system that was neither one thing nor the other. India adopted the shell of the teacher-centred, subject-delivering classroom while carrying, buried somewhere beneath the surface, a cultural memory of something considerably more ambitious. The result has been a peculiar kind of institutional amnesia — a system that still uses words like "guru vandan" and "acharya" ceremonially, while structurally functioning as a syllabus-delivery mechanism.

Kaka Kalelkar, writing in independent India, put this with unusual bluntness: education, he insisted, is not merely viveka, not merely buddhi, not merely gyan, not merely information. Education, he said, is that dharma-oriented covering which teaches us the values of humanity itself — and by dharma he did not mean any particular sect or creed, but sanatana in its proper sense: not "eternal" in some static way, but a living mixture of the ancient and the ever-renewing, the prachin and the arvachin held together. That his generation could articulate this vision with such clarity, and that independent India — more than seven decades on — has still not built an education system around it, is one of the quieter tragedies of the republic's institutional history.

The Colonial Mind and the Loss of Educational Identity

Why did a nation that fought so hard for political freedom fail, for so long, to reclaim its educational philosophy? The honest answer requires looking at two specific mechanisms of colonization that outlasted colonial rule itself: received knowledge and received experience.

Long after the political apparatus of empire departed, India retained the conviction that the colonizer's knowledge was supreme and that the colonizer's experience was supreme, while its own was, by comparison, inferior and therefore unfit to be carried forward. This was not simply a case of borrowing useful ideas from elsewhere — every civilization borrows. It was something closer to an internalized hierarchy, in which whatever "they" taught, however arbitrarily selected, became unquestionable, and whatever was indigenous became, by default, suspect.

The examples are almost comic in their pettiness, were the consequences not so serious. Kalidasa's *Abhijnanashakuntalam* was long kept out of the curriculum on grounds of obscenity, while poems considerably more explicit by canonical English authors, such as 'To His Coy Mistress' by Andrew Marvell (which is certainly more obscene) remained comfortably

enshrined, decade after decade, in the very same syllabi — taught, uncomfortably, to this day. This was never really a debate about literary merit or propriety. It was a demonstration of an uncomfortable truth: India never developed, in its modern educational apparatus, a questioning spirit strong enough to interrogate the three foundational pillars any curriculum must eventually examine — the relationship between teacher and taught, the method of teaching, and the material being taught.

Consider each in turn. On the relationship between teacher and taught, Indian education simply stopped asking what that relationship was for. On method, the very fact of memorization became sacrosanct, because whatever the colonial curriculum prescribed was treated as final; students memorized without comprehending, and comprehension became optional to the exercise of passing. And so, if the whole of the modern Indian education system had to be compressed into two words, those words would be uncomfortably accurate: production and reproduction. The teacher prepares material in the classroom; the student somehow absorbs it; and in the examination hall, the student's task is simply to shrink what was given and hand it back, undigested, the way a bird regurgitates food for its young.

This is the great and now urgent challenge before Indian higher education — a challenge made considerably sharper by the arrival of artificial intelligence, because a student who can obtain from a large language model exactly the kind of "coaching solution" a lecture once offered will, quite reasonably, begin to ask why attendance is compulsory at all. Any occasion built around honouring teachers — a Guru Vandan programme, for instance — ought therefore to become an occasion for institutional self-examination rather than institutional self-congratulation. There is no creativity in the contemporary Indian classroom. There is no critical thinking built into contemporary Indian classroom teaching. And where both are absent, a student's presence in that classroom becomes, quite rationally, optional.

Education Beyond Information

If education is not reducible to information, what, precisely, does it consist of? The Indian tradition offers a layered answer, and the layers are worth separating carefully, because contemporary policy discourse tends to collapse them into a single undifferentiated mass called "content."

Information is the raw material — dates, formulas, facts, data points — infinitely available, and now infinitely available at zero cost through artificial intelligence. Knowledge is information organized and understood, still a considerably more modest achievement than it is often given credit for. Wisdom is knowledge tempered by experience and by an ethical sensibility about when and how it should be used. And jeevan drishti, life-vision, sits above even wisdom: it is the orientation that allows a person to know not merely what to do with a piece of knowledge, but who they are becoming as they use it.

Human values — what an older Indian vocabulary would have called sanskar, a word with genuinely no equivalent in English — belong to this uppermost layer. Sanskar is not "values," not quite; it is closer to values, certainly closer than "culture" is to sanskriti, but it retains a texture that resists direct translation, because the concept it names simply did not exist in the framework that English grew up inside. An education system that trains students only in information, while calling that training "holistic," has confused the foundation for the building.

Why Creativity Has Disappeared from Classrooms

The production-reproduction model did not emerge from malice; it emerged from an accumulation of small institutional choices, compounding across generations, until rote learning became indistinguishable from education itself. Competitive examinations, even now, test almost nothing but retrieval. Teacher recruitment itself has, at times, been subjected to the same logic — appointing music instructors through objective-question examinations that never once ask the candidate to actually play an instrument. If a system trains and certifies for one kind of competence while genuinely requiring another, the incoherence eventually shows up in the classroom, and it shows up as the absence of the two faculties every serious education is meant to cultivate: creativity and critical thinking.

The deeper institutional habit that enabled this was a persistent overemphasis on *nirman* — building, constructing, assembling systems — at the cost of *srijan*, genuine creation. India built structures: boards, universities, affiliating bodies, examination councils. It built very little in the way of an ecosystem that rewarded original thought within those structures. Precisely because building the system remained the focal point of post-independence educational policy, the republic drifted from the deeper objective that its own founding thinkers had actually intended for it.

The costs of this drift are not abstract. They surface, embarrassingly, in ordinary encounters. A visiting scholar touring Rajasthan's temples in search of research material once asked why Lord Ganesha's idols are positioned in a particular way, and why a rat is invariably found at his feet — questions any custodian of that civilizational inheritance ought to be able to answer, yet frequently cannot, because the tradition has been reduced, in practice, to ritual without explanation. Once knowledge is separated from its meaning, the meaning is very easily mistaken for superstition, and abandoned along with it. That is precisely how living civilizational knowledge quietly becomes "*andhviswas*" — blind belief — in the eyes of its own inheritors, not because the knowledge was ever irrational, but because no one troubled to keep teaching its rationale forward.

AI Will Not Replace Teachers — It Will Replace Ordinary Teaching

It is tempting, in a moment of technological anxiety, to frame artificial intelligence as an adversary of the teaching profession. This framing is a mistake, and a costly one. What artificial intelligence threatens is not teaching as such, but a very particular, historically recent, and rather impoverished version of teaching — the version organized entirely around the delivery and retrieval of information. That version was always going to be automated eventually; large language models have simply arrived sooner than the profession expected.

Consider the ordinary act of drafting official correspondence. What once took the better part of an hour of careful composition can now be produced, in a first draft, in seconds — a command is issued, the letter appears, and the human contribution shifts entirely to judgment: does this draft carry the right tone, has it captured the right nuance, does it need to be reshaped before it goes out. That shift — from generation to judgment, from production to curation and refinement — is precisely the shift that Indian classrooms now need to make with their students, at every level, without delay.

There is no realistic possibility of preventing students from using artificial intelligence tools, and institutions that attempt prohibition rather than pedagogy are choosing to fight a battle they cannot win while losing the one they could. If a student cannot be stopped from consulting AI, the only serious institutional response is to redesign the assessment itself so that the two faculties AI cannot yet substitute — creativity and critical thinking — become the actual object of evaluation. Let the tool draft; let the student decide, question, refine, and take responsibility for the result. That is not a lowering of standards. It is, if anything, a considerably higher standard than mere memorization ever was.

This is precisely the logic behind embedding compulsory AI instruction across the first three semesters of undergraduate education as part of Skill Enhancement Courses — beginning deliberately with the simplest possible entry point, prompt engineering, before advancing toward more sophisticated applications in subsequent semesters. The pedagogical wager here is straightforward: a generation that learns to direct artificial intelligence with precision and discernment, rather than being directed by it, will be considerably better prepared for a labour market and a public life increasingly mediated by these tools. Prompt engineering, in this framing, is not a narrow technical skill; it is an early and accessible entry point into a much larger discipline of directing intelligent systems toward wise ends — which was, after all, always the Guru's task, however unfamiliar the tools.

The classrooms that survive this transition intact will be the ones that stopped competing with AI at retrieval and started competing with it at the two things it still cannot reliably do: ask the right question, and know, ethically, what to do with the answer.

Reclaiming Bharat Bodh

Running underneath every one of these pedagogical problems is a linguistic one, and it deserves to be named directly: a great many of the concepts that Indian civilization actually lives by have no honest English equivalent, and the habit of translating them anyway — carelessly, as though translation were a simple matter of substitution — has quietly deformed the concepts themselves.

Take dharma. It has been routinely rendered as "religion," yet Indian thought elaborated dharma through the four purusharthas — dharma, artha, kama, moksha — a framework in which dharma never once referred to a specific creed or institutional faith. A dharmashala is not a shrine to any particular religion; a dharma-bhai is not a brother in any particular faith. When the word "dharma" was casually translated as "religion" and left unglossed, an entire generation of students absorbed the substitution as fact, with no annotation ever clarifying that the Indian term names something structurally different from its English stand-in.

Take rashtra and "nation." Sri Aurobindo, in his address on the eve of independence on 14 August 1947, insisted that India's rashtra neither was nor would become a "nation" in the Western sense, because a nation is decided purely by geographical boundary, whereas a rashtra is bound to its sanskriti — its civilizational culture — a bond no redrawing of borders can dissolve. India continues, even now, to use "nation" where "rashtra" carries a categorically different meaning, often without recognizing that a substitution has even taken place.

Take swaraj. When Gandhi wrote Hind Swaraj, he deliberately did not translate the title. Yet in subsequent usage, swaraj has been rendered variously as autonomy, home rule, and self-rule — each a partial capture of a concept that, properly understood, refers to *atmik shasan*: the governance of the self by the self, an inward sovereignty of which political self-governance is only the outward expression. Gandhi's own text makes this inward meaning explicit; the available English glosses generally do not.

Take vidya. The tradition holds *sa vidya ya vimuktaye* — that vidya is precisely what liberates — a definition of learning as a means of liberty, not merely a synonym for "knowledge." Reduce vidya to "knowledge" and the liberatory function embedded in the very definition of learning disappears from view entirely.

Take *samskara*, *riti*, and even the ordinary word "values." *Samskara* has, properly speaking, no translation word in English at all — it names something for which the receiving language never developed a category, so it is routinely and inadequately mapped onto "values," which is itself a separate and only partially overlapping idea, and *riti* is flattened into "custom," losing whatever it was that made *riti* distinct from mere habit.

None of this is pedantry. Language, properly understood, is not merely a vehicle of communication; it is a socio-culturally determined behaviour, carrying within its grain the civilization that shaped it. When a civilization allows its own conceptual vocabulary to be quietly replaced by imperfect foreign equivalents, it does not simply lose some words — it loses the fine-grained categories those words alone could express, and with them, eventually, the capacity to think certain thoughts at all. China, by contrast, has taken the position that its own cultural vocabulary should be retained even when writing in other languages, precisely to prevent this kind of conceptual erosion. There is no obvious reason India could not adopt the same discipline, at least in those places where fidelity to the source concept genuinely matters more than convenience.

Curriculum Reform

The gurukul model, whatever its historical limitations, offers a genuinely useful design principle here: the guru in a gurukul was not a subject specialist but a generalist who taught both *shastra* and *shastra* — scripture and weaponry, the contemplative and the practical — within a single pedagogical relationship, and who lived alongside students of every social background without distinction, a Krishna and a Sudama sharing the same austere household and the same daily obligations. That interdisciplinary, experiential, relationally intimate model of learning was substantially lost when Indian higher education adopted a compartmentalized departmental structure — political science in one box, sociology in another, each travelling in its own railway carriage, as it were, oblivious to its neighbours.

The remedy already exists in outline, and NEP 2020's emphasis on liberal, multidisciplinary undergraduate education gestures toward exactly this kind of recovery, treating the humanities and social sciences as a connected field of inquiry rather than a set of walled disciplines. Concretely, this can mean introducing value-added papers that root students in their own civilizational and institutional context — courses on *prakriti bodh*, on the pilgrimage geography of Prayagraj, on karma yoga, on the life and thought of a university's own founding figures. It is a small but telling failure when a doctoral candidate, interviewed for a position at a university named after a historical founder, cannot identify who that founder was;

an institution that cannot teach its own students its own institutional memory has little standing to claim it is transmitting civilizational memory more broadly.

Five Es of Future Education

If Indian higher education is to root itself in *bharat bodh* — an authentically Indian understanding of what education is for — that understanding needs pillars sturdy enough to organize a curriculum around, not merely a mood to invoke at ceremonial occasions. Five such pillars suggest themselves, and each deserves brief elaboration.

Ethics must anchor every professional and technical discipline, not survive as an optional add-on paper, because a civilization that produces technically brilliant graduates with no correspondingly serious ethical formation has solved only half the problem education exists to solve.

Economy requires that universities take seriously the practical, livelihood-generating dimension of learning without allowing marketability to become the sole horizon of education — market-driven education is not wrong, but it becomes distorting the moment it crowds out every other purpose learning might serve.

Environment asks that ecological consciousness be taught as inseparable from Indian civilizational thought itself, in which nature was never treated as raw material to be extracted but as a living order of which the human being was one participant among many.

Enlightenment, in this framing, restores something closer to the older Indian sense of the term — not merely intellectual illumination but the *jeevan drishti* discussed earlier, the capacity to see one's life and choices with clarity rather than through inherited assumption.

Entrepreneurship completes the circle by insisting that creativity — *srijan*, not merely *nirman* — be treated as an educational outcome in its own right, so that graduates leave the university equipped to originate rather than only to execute.

Taken together, these five Es offer a genuinely usable design language for curriculum committees, one considerably more actionable than the abstract exhortation to be "rooted in Indian values" that so often substitutes for policy.

The SMART Model of Bharat Bodh

A civilizational education agenda, however inspiring in principle, tends to dissolve into rhetoric unless it is made operationally disciplined, and here a second, complementary framework is useful: *bharat bodh*, to be more than sentiment, should be Systematic, in that it follows a coherent design rather than ad hoc gestures; Measurable, in that institutions can actually track whether it is being achieved; Achievable, calibrated to what a given university or department can realistically deliver; Reliable, consistent across cohorts and years rather than dependent on any one enthusiastic individual; and Time-tested, drawing on frameworks and practices with a demonstrated record rather than novelty for its own sake. Without this operational discipline, civilizational education risks becoming exactly the kind of unexamined inheritance the tradition

itself warns against — something accepted simply because an authority prescribed it, the very habit of mind that produced received knowledge and received experience in the first place.

The Teacher of Tomorrow

All of this converges on a single, quite demanding portrait of what a teacher in Indian higher education will need to become over the next decade. Not merely an instructor delivering a syllabus a machine can now deliver more efficiently, but a mentor capable of shaping judgment; a philosopher capable of situating a discipline within a larger vision of human flourishing; a guide comfortable enough with uncertainty to let students find their own path through a problem rather than handing them a memorized answer; a creator modelling *srijan* rather than mere *nirman*; and, when the institution and the individual both rise to the occasion, something closer to what Indian tradition always meant by *Guru* — a giver of *jeevan drishti*, life-vision, in a world where information has become, for the first time in human history, essentially free.

This is not a nostalgic call to abandon technology or retreat into ritual. Swami Vivekananda addressed Western audience in their own language while insisting on the singular value of Indian thought; Gandhi built a global political movement using the coloniser's own tongue while writing *Hind Svaraj* to preserve, deliberately untranslated, a category the coloniser's language could not hold; Tagore built an entire pedagogy, at Santiniketan, around the conviction that creativity and rootedness were not opposites but partners. None of these figures rejected modernity. Each of them insisted, in their different registers, that modernity be met on Indian civilizational terms rather than absorbed on someone else's.

India's higher education system now stands at a comparable juncture, with artificial intelligence playing the role that colonial administration once played: an external force capable of hollowing out an educational system that has forgotten its own purpose, or, met with sufficient clarity, an occasion to finally recover that purpose. NEP 2020 has opened an institutional window for this recovery — multi-disciplinarily, value-added education, Indian Knowledge Systems as a formal curricular category — but a policy window is not, by itself, a change in practice. That change will be made, if it is made at all, in individual classrooms, by individual teachers willing to treat every occasion of honouring a teacher as an occasion of honest self-examination rather than comfortable celebration.

India's future will not be shaped merely by teachers who transfer knowledge, but by *Gurus* who awaken consciousness, nurture creativity, preserve civilizational wisdom, and prepare learners for an AI-enabled yet deeply human future.
