

## Classroom Practices for Integrating Gurukul/Ashram Traditions with NEP-2020's Learner-Centric and Experiential Pedagogy

Prof Mamta Sharma <sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) advocates for a transition from rote memorization and examination-centric instruction to experiential, learner-focused, and discussion-oriented pedagogy, while explicitly promoting the incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into curricula (Kaur Sangha, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2020). Gurukul and ashram traditions historically organised education around residential community living, close guru–shishya mentoring, value-oriented formation and learning through real-life tasks (“An ancient Gurukul education system in India,” 2025; Development of the Gurukula Education System in India, 2024). This qualitative study examines how gurukul-inspired practices can operationalise NEP-2020's vision in contemporary higher education. Drawing on policy and literature analysis, classroom observations and faculty–student narratives from three institutions that have initiated IKS-aligned reforms, the paper identifies four key classroom practices: small learning circles, experiential and craft-based learning, contemplative and well-being activities, and mother-tongue/local knowledge integration. Findings indicate strong convergence between gurukul principles and NEP-2020 descriptors of holistic, competency-based, inquiry-driven pedagogy, alongside persistent challenges related to rigid timetables, exam-centric assessment, faculty preparedness, resource constraints and epistemic resistance (Educational Research Review, 2025; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025). A phased implementation framework is proposed, linking course-level innovation with institutional policy and quality-assurance mechanisms. Context-sensitive blending of gurukul/ashram traditions with contemporary learner-centric approaches is argued to deepen cultural rootedness, enhance critical thinking and support ethically grounded, future-ready graduates.

**Keywords:** *Gurukul education system, learner-centric pedagogy, experiential learning, Indian Knowledge Systems, NEP-2020*

NEP-2020 seeks to “transform India into a vibrant knowledge society and global knowledge superpower” by restructuring curricula, pedagogy and assessment around holistic development and twenty-first century competencies (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 3). Among its most important pedagogical directives is the shift from content-heavy, exam-oriented instruction toward experiential, inquiry-based, discussion-centred and learner-centric approaches that foster critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving (Kaur Sangha, 2023; Vega Education Blog, 2023). The policy also stresses the need to integrate IKS

<sup>1</sup> KM College, University of Delhi, India, Email: mamta610@gmail.com

\*Corresponding Author

**Received: March 01, 2026; Revision Received: March 20, 2026; Accepted: March 22, 2026**

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across disciplines through multidisciplinary courses, use of Indian languages and engagement with local communities (Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).

India's own educational heritage offers a powerful precedent for these aspirations. Gurukul and ashram systems organised learning around residential communities in which students lived with the guru, shared daily work and spiritual practice and received personalised instruction ("An ancient Gurukul education system in India," 2025). These institutions aimed at character formation, self-discipline and practical competence as much as intellectual mastery, thereby embodying what current discourse calls "holistic education" (Development of the Gurukula Education System in India, 2024).

Conceptual work has begun to outline how IKS can be integrated into modern curricula (Theoretical Framework for Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, 2022; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025) and how experiential learning can be implemented under NEP-2020 (Kaur Sangha, 2023). However, there is limited empirical research on concrete classroom practices that explicitly draw on gurukul/ashram traditions while aligning with NEP-2020's learner-centric and experiential vision in higher education. The present study addresses this gap by analysing pedagogical innovations in three Indian higher-education institutions that have initiated IKS-aligned reforms. The objectives are to:

1. Analyse convergences between gurukul/ashram traditions and NEP-2020's learner-centric, experiential pedagogy.
2. Document classroom practices that blend these traditions in higher-education settings.
3. Examine faculty and student perceptions of benefits and challenges.
4. Propose a phased implementation framework consistent with NEP-2020 and IKS guidelines.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Gurukul and Ashram Education*

Historical accounts describe the gurukul system as a residential education model in which pupils lived in the teacher's household or ashram, engaging in study, manual work, physical training and spiritual discipline ("An ancient Gurukul education system in India," 2025). The guru-shishya relationship was deeply personal and long-term, involving close observation of the student's character and gradual entrusting of responsibility (Development of the Gurukula Education System in India, 2024).

Studies of this system emphasise features such as holistic development, value-based education, experiential learning through participation in daily tasks, and integration of intellectual and practical skills (Social Science Journal, 2025; Vediconcepts, 2025). Comparative analyses argue that the gurukul model provided stronger mentoring and community bonding than many modern schools, while respecting individual learning paces (Social Science Journal, 2025). These characteristics resonate with contemporary calls for socio-emotional learning and personalised instruction.

#### *NEP-2020, Experiential Learning and Learner-Centred Pedagogy*

NEP-2020 underscores that pedagogy should be "experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible and fun" (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 13). Empirical studies examining NEP-aligned practices

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report that project, field-based and inquiry-oriented activities enhance student engagement, critical thinking and problem-solving when thoughtfully embedded in curricula (Kaur Sangha, 2023; "Vivification of Experiential Learning with Reference to NEP-2020," 2024). Investigations of experiential approaches in teacher education and language classrooms similarly note improvements in motivation and skill acquisition, while highlighting time and assessment constraints (Tom, 2024; "Experiential Learning (Innovative Pedagogy under NEP-2020)," 2025).

A systematic review of NEP-2020 implementation emphasises that realising experiential and learner-centred pedagogy requires reform of timetable structures, assessment regimes and teacher preparation programmes (Educational Research Review, 2025). Without such systemic changes, experiential activities risk remaining peripheral rather than central to learning.

### *Indian Knowledge Systems in Contemporary Education*

IKS encompasses a broad spectrum of philosophical, scientific, technological and artistic traditions developed on the Indian subcontinent, including Ayurveda, Yoga, traditional mathematics, classical arts and local ecological knowledge (Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025). NEP-2020 encourages institutions to integrate IKS through new courses, research, use of local languages and community engagement (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Theoretical and policy-oriented work suggests that integrating IKS can decolonise curricula, enhance relevance to local contexts and foster sustainable development (Theoretical Framework for Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, 2022; Integrating the Indian Knowledge System into Modern Education, 2025). Yet these studies also identify obstacles such as limited teacher expertise, lack of curricular materials and epistemic biases that privilege Western knowledge (Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025; Integrating the Indian Knowledge System into Modern Education, 2025).

### *Research Gap*

While NEP-2020, experiential learning and IKS have been extensively discussed, few empirical studies focus on higher-education classrooms where gurukul-inspired practices are consciously designed to align with NEP-2020. Existing work tends to remain conceptual or policy-oriented, leaving a gap in understanding how such practices are implemented, perceived and sustained in real institutional environments.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Research Design*

An interpretivist qualitative design was chosen to explore how teachers and students understand and experience gurukul-inspired, NEP-aligned practices. Such a design is appropriate because pedagogy is contextually embedded and the study aims to capture meaning rather than test hypotheses (Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).

### *Sample and Setting*

Purposive sampling identified three higher-education institutions (two colleges and one university department) that had explicitly referenced IKS or gurukul values in their NEP-2020 implementation plans and had initiated at least two relevant classroom practices. Within these

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institutions, maximum-variation sampling selected 18 faculty members and 36 students representing arts, science and commerce disciplines and varied socioeconomic backgrounds (Theoretical Framework for Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, 2022).

### *Data Collection*

*Data were collected from three sources.*

*Document analysis.* Institutional NEP-2020 implementation frameworks, IQAC reports and curriculum documents were examined, along with national guidelines on innovative pedagogy and assessment reforms (Ministry of Education, 2020). These documents provided information on rationales, goals and formal structures supporting gurukul-inspired practices.

*Semi-structured interviews.* Individual interviews were conducted with 18 faculty and 18 students, and two focus-group discussions were held with an additional 18 students. Interviews explored participants' experiences of small learning circles, experiential activities, contemplative practices and local-knowledge projects, perceived benefits, challenges and alignment with NEP-2020 and gurukul principles. Question guides drew on descriptors of learner-centred and experiential pedagogy and on IKS integration frameworks (Kaur Sangha, 2023; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).

*Classroom observations.* Twelve classroom sessions that incorporated one or more gurukul-inspired practices were observed using a structured schedule focusing on student participation, teacher roles, use of language, nature of tasks and assessment modes (Vega Education Blog, 2023).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with participants' consent. Ethical clearance was obtained from institutional review boards, and pseudonyms were used in reporting.

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis followed an inductive–deductive procedure. First, open coding of transcripts and fieldnotes generated descriptive categories such as “family-like groups,” “time pressure,” “assessment misfit,” “cultural pride” and “faculty vulnerability.” Second, deductive coding applied analytical categories from NEP-2020 (learner-centred, experiential, holistic) and from IKS integration models (local knowledge, language, community engagement) (Ministry of Education, 2020; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025). Codes were grouped into four overarching themes: (a) convergence of values, (b) gurukul-inspired practices, (c) perceived impacts and (d) structural and epistemic constraints. Triangulation across documents, interviews and observations, and member checking with six faculty members, enhanced trustworthiness.

## **RESULTS**

### *Convergence Between Gurukul Principles and NEP-2020*

Participants widely perceived NEP-2020 as legitimising practices inspired by India's educational heritage. Faculty described NEP-2020 as “bringing back” the essence of guru–shishya relationships by emphasising mentoring, student agency and holistic development. Institutional documents similarly framed NEP initiatives as “reviving India's traditional

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holistic education” (Theoretical Framework for Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, 2022).

Four areas of convergence were identified.

*Holistic development.* Gurukul education aimed at intellectual, moral, physical and spiritual growth (“An ancient Gurukul education system in India,” 2025), which corresponds to NEP-2020’s emphasis on development across cognitive, socio-emotional and psychomotor domains (Ministry of Education, 2020).

*Experiential orientation.* Learning in gurukuls often occurred through work in fields, kitchens, forests and workshops, not only through recitation (Social Science Journal, 2025). NEP-2020 advocates project-based, field-based and inquiry-driven learning that similarly emphasises application and discovery (Kaur Sangha, 2023).

*Community and relationship.* The ashram community, where learners lived and worked together under the guru’s guidance, mirrors NEP-2020’s focus on cooperative learning and positive teacher–student relationships as foundations for learning (Development of the Gurukula Education System in India, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2020).

*Cultural rootedness.* Gurukul education was embedded in Indian philosophical and ecological traditions. NEP-2020 calls for integrating IKS and using mother-tongue or regional languages as media of instruction, particularly in the early stages (Ministry of Education, 2020; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).

These convergences provided both ethical justification and practical guidance for designing new classroom practices.

### *Gurukul-Inspired Classroom Practices*

Four main clusters of practice emerged across the three institutions.

#### *Small Learning Circles*

All institutions created small learning circles of about eight to ten students attached to a faculty mentor. These circles met fortnightly to discuss course content, share challenges, set personal goals and reflect on experiences. Students described them as “mini-families” and said they could voice doubts more freely than in large lectures. Observations showed higher student talk time and peer explanation in learning circles than in conventional sessions, aligning with learner-centred indicators such as active participation and student-to-student interaction (Vega Education Blog, 2023). Faculty explicitly linked this model to the guru–shishya tradition, interpreting their role as mentors responsible for holistic development rather than solely as lecturers (“An ancient Gurukul education system in India,” 2025).

#### *Experiential and Craft-Based Learning*

Courses introduced a range of experiential activities: environmental studies students conducted campus audits of water and energy use; commerce students documented value chains of local handloom cooperatives; teacher-education students facilitated learning games in neighbourhood schools. Some departments organised craft workshops with local artisans, where students engaged in pottery, weaving or metalwork and analysed the economic and ecological aspects of these trades.

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These tasks were evaluated through reports, presentations and reflective journals. Students reported that experiential activities helped them “see theory in real life” and “remember concepts better,” echoing findings that experiential learning enhances application and retention (Kaur Sangha, 2023; “Vivification of Experiential Learning with Reference to NEP-2020,” 2024). Faculty noted that such activities were strongly aligned with NEP-2020's emphasis on real-world learning and with the gurukul principle of learning through participation in daily work (Social Science Journal, 2025).

### *Contemplative and Well-Being Activities*

Many courses opened with brief sessions of yoga, breathing or mindfulness, followed by a minute of silence or a short reflection on an ethical question linked to the topic. Teachers cited ashram practices of daily sadhana and moral contemplation as inspiration (Development of the Gurukula Education System in India, 2024). Students widely reported that these practices reduced anxiety, improved concentration and fostered a respectful classroom atmosphere. These perceptions resonate with research showing that contemplative practices can enhance attention and emotional regulation (“Experiential Learning (Innovative Pedagogy under NEP-2020),” 2025; “Vivification of Experiential Learning with Reference to NEP-2020,” 2024).

### *Mother-Tongue and Local Knowledge Integration*

In accordance with NEP-2020's multilingual vision, teachers often introduced complex concepts in the regional language before moving to English terminology. Several courses assigned projects in which students interviewed local farmers, artisans or traditional healers, recording practices and terminologies in local languages and then analysing them using disciplinary frameworks.

Students reported increased pride in their culture and greater respect for community knowledge holders. Faculty pointed to IKS integration frameworks that advocate community-anchored, place-based learning as justification for such projects (Integrating the Indian Knowledge System into Modern Education, 2025; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).

### *Perceived Impacts*

Across institutions, participants identified a common set of positive impacts.

1. Enhanced engagement and understanding. Students attributed greater conceptual clarity and motivation to experiential activities and small group discussions.
2. Sense of belonging. Learning circles fostered peer support and closer relationships with teachers, which students described as “feeling seen.” This was particularly beneficial for first-generation learners.
3. Cultural rootedness. Engagement with local knowledge and discussion of gurukul traditions led students to see Indian heritage as a living source of insight, not merely as history, supporting arguments in favour of IKS integration (Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).
4. Holistic growth. Students and teachers noted improvements in confidence, empathy and self-awareness, which they linked to mentoring, contemplative practice and community engagement.

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### *Challenges and Constraints*

Despite these benefits, several constraints limited implementation.

- A. Rigid timetables and credit structures. Timetables designed around fixed 50-minute periods left little scope for extended fieldwork or reflection. Faculty felt pressured to “cover the syllabus,” echoing broader concerns that structural rigidity undermines NEP-2020's pedagogical vision (Educational Research Review, 2025).
- B. Assessment misalignment. Summative exams remained the dominant mode of evaluation, making it difficult to allocate meaningful weight to portfolios, reflective journals or community feedback. Teachers feared that innovative assessment might not be recognised in external examinations.
- C. Faculty preparedness. Many teachers had limited experience with experiential design, facilitation of dialogue or IKS content, and expressed uncertainty about assessment criteria. This aligns with literature identifying teacher capacity as a central barrier to IKS integration (Integrating the Indian Knowledge System into Modern Education, 2025; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).
- D. Resource constraints. Organising field visits, craft workshops and community projects required time, transportation and materials that were not always available.
- E. Epistemic resistance. Some colleagues questioned the academic rigour of local-knowledge projects or perceived gurukul references as nostalgic, reflecting epistemic biases that privilege Western frameworks (Integrating the Indian Knowledge System into Modern Education, 2025).

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings confirm that gurukul and ashram traditions can be productively connected with NEP-2020's learner-centric and experiential pedagogy. Small learning circles operationalise the guru–shishya ethos within mass higher-education systems, supporting research that close teacher–student relationships are crucial for learner-centred reforms (Vega Education Blog, 2023). Experiential and craft-based learning activities embody NEP-2020's advocacy of project and field-based learning while drawing on the gurukul principle of learning through participation in real-life tasks (Social Science Journal, 2025).

Contemplative and well-being activities bridge contemporary psychological insights on mindfulness with traditional ashram disciplines, offering culturally familiar means of fostering holistic development (“Vivification of Experiential Learning with Reference to NEP-2020,” 2024). Mother-tongue and local-knowledge integration simultaneously implement NEP-2020's multilingual and IKS agendas and counteract epistemic hierarchies by recognising community knowledge (Integrating the Indian Knowledge System into Modern Education, 2025; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).

At the same time, the study reinforces concerns that pedagogical innovation cannot succeed without systemic change. Rigid timetable and credit structures, exam-centric assessment and limited professional development constrain the depth and sustainability of gurukul-inspired practices, echoing national-level evaluations of NEP-2020 implementation (Educational Research Review, 2025). These findings suggest that institutions must align curriculum regulations, assessment policies and quality-assurance mechanisms with their stated commitment to experiential, learner-centred and IKS-oriented education. A phased implementation model appears promising. Phase 1 involves piloting gurukul-inspired practices

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in a small number of courses and documenting outcomes. Phase 2 scales successful models to additional programmes, supported by structured faculty development and communities of practice. Phase 3 embeds such practices in programme learning outcomes, curriculum regulations, workload norms and NAAC/IQAC documentation, using competency-based rubrics and multiple forms of evidence of learning (Theoretical Framework for Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, 2022; Upadhyay & Pandey, 2025).

### CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that gurukul/ashram traditions can be meaningfully integrated with NEP-2020's learner-centric and experiential pedagogy through specific classroom practices in contemporary higher-education institutions. Small learning circles, experiential and craft-based learning, contemplative and well-being activities, and mother-tongue/local knowledge integration promote engagement, cultural rootedness and holistic development while aligning with national policy priorities. For policymakers and institutional leaders, the findings suggest that NEP-2020's transformative aspirations are most likely to be realised when reforms are rooted in India's own educational heritage and supported by structural changes in timetabling, assessment and faculty development. Future research using mixed methods could quantify learning gains, compare models across regions and track long-term impacts on graduate attributes and community engagement. Nevertheless, the evidence here indicates that blending gurukul/ashram traditions with learner-centric approaches offers a promising pathway toward creating rooted yet future-ready higher education in India.

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Vivification of Experiential Learning with Reference to NEP-2020. (2024). *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, 15(1), 120–129.

***Acknowledgments***

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

***How to cite this article:*** Sharma, M. (2026) Classroom Practices for Integrating Gurukul/Ashram Traditions with NEP-2020's Learner-Centric and Experiential Pedagogy. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(1), 132-140. DIP: 18.02.1022/20261101, DOI: 10.25215/2455/11011022