

Education for Man-Making and Self-Transformation

B Mahadevan¹

Abstract

Education plays a pivotal role in the lives of every individual, particularly within today's fiercely competitive landscape. Contemporary education has become primarily focused on providing "inputs for a living." This has created significant challenges for working professionals, who often experience a lack of meaning and dissatisfaction in the workplace, leading to stress and burnout. Long working hours, an inability to navigate workplace dynamics, and deficient communication and interpersonal skills frequently hinder both their professional and personal lives. While "inputs for living" are essential, this paper argues that "inputs for life" are equally vital. We contend that the paradigm of modern education must conform to that which liberates us from the clutches of bondage.

Spiritual masters such as Swami Chinmayananda have laid great emphasis on developing a holistic education leading to good character formation. An individual anchored in character remains unperturbed by life's inevitable fluctuations—the "upswings and downswings." This fosters a profound sense of equanimity, allowing one to engage in their vocation with undistracted focus and purpose. Ultimately, this internal stability forms the bedrock for broader societal prosperity. By reorienting our focus toward these values, we can restore the true purpose of education.

Key words: Education, Man-making, Character, Swami Chinmayananda

¹ B Mahadevan, Professor (Retd.), IIM Bangalore, b.mahadevan@iimb.ac.in

Education for Man-Making and Self-Transformation

Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in the lives of every individual, particularly within today's fiercely competitive landscape. It is widely recognized that a quality education serves as a "passport" to a comfortable life by opening a world of opportunities, whether through securing gainful employment or pursuing higher studies at reputable universities. Consequently, parents are singularly focused on ensuring their children gain admission to the right courses at prestigious institutions. In the public consciousness, a "good education" is often synonymous with degrees in engineering or medicine, perhaps followed by a management degree. Thus, contemporary education has become primarily focused on providing "inputs for a living."

One consequence of this utilitarian approach is the proliferation of engineering colleges and business schools in India. The number of engineering colleges rose from 1,511 in 2006–07 to over 3,300 in 2014–15, producing more than 1.5 million graduates annually. However, more than one-third of these graduates faced unemployment due to a lack of available positions. Furthermore, many graduates were deemed unemployable; several years ago, Narayana Murthy of Infosys remarked that the firm found over 85% of graduates "not employable." Even among those who secured jobs, a sizeable number received stagnant, meagre salaries. Inadequate skilling has also created significant challenges for working professionals, who often experience a lack of meaning and dissatisfaction in the workplace, leading to stress and burnout. Long working hours, an inability to navigate workplace dynamics, and deficient communication and interpersonal skills frequently hinder both their professional and personal lives.

Against this backdrop, this paper addresses two primary questions:

1. What should be the fundamental goals and objectives of education?
2. How can a superior educational model transform both individuals and society?

This paper advocates for a broader conceptualization of educational objectives. While "inputs for living" are essential, this paper argues that "inputs for life" are equally vital. The paper traces recent policy shifts introduced through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, noting that while the policy is a welcome step toward changing the educational paradigm, it lacks sufficient emphasis on concepts such as "spirituality." Ultimately, this paper contends that the paradigm of modern education must conform to the proclamation found in the *Vishnu Puranam*: "या विद्या सा विमुक्तये" (*yā vidyā sā vimuktaye*), which translates to "education is that which liberates us from the clutches of bondage."

Limitations of the Current Educational Paradigm

The current educational paradigm often compels young children to forfeit the opportunity to unlock their creative energy and discover their inherent passions, likes, and dislikes. Instead, they are subjected to a rigorous and narrow routine centered on Mathematics and Science. Various models exist solely to train children for competitive examinations, such as the JEE and NEET; in these frameworks, youth are subjected to high-pressure learning of skills primarily designed for passing entrance exams. While many students successfully clear these hurdles and obtain professional degrees that promise high earning potential, they frequently find themselves inept at handling "real-life" challenges, both during their academic tenure and in their subsequent careers.

Working professionals who have navigated these obstacles encounter a further set of challenges during their career progression. A significant number find little satisfaction in the workplace, leading to chronic stress and job burnout (Marques, 2011). Factors such as excessive work hours, an inability to navigate workplace dynamics, and deficient communication and interpersonal skills frequently obstruct both professional efficacy and personal well-being (Fry and Cohen, 2009). Furthermore, many struggle to strike a balance between professional demands and domestic challenges. Consequently, a number of professionals feel they lack a cohesive framework for life—one that would enable them to pursue their passions and develop personal interests while fulfilling their official responsibilities. This fundamentally necessitates a re-evaluation of the question: "What is the ultimate goal of education?"

It appears that merely equipping students with technical jargon and familiarising them with state-of-the-art techniques is insufficient. The assumption that "job-seeking" education is the "be-all and end-all" of development is short-sighted; it fails to cultivate the inner strength required to navigate the multifaceted situations of life. This brings to mind the basic axiom that well-developed individuals do not merely secure employment; they remain fulfilled individuals who pursue personal interests while contributing productively to the workforce. This is the archetype of the future citizen we require, and the educational system must be capable of fostering such holistic development.

Clearly, the "job-seeking" approach fails to address these requirements, necessitating a fundamental shift in perspective. Only an education that fosters happiness and self-actualisation—consistent with the ideal of विद्या (*vidyā*)—will enable an individual to contribute meaningfully at work and at home. Modern educational programs must integrate these considerations. While they must provide robust training in modern disciplines to ensure

employability, they must, in equal measure, cultivate individual interests and provide opportunities for students to explore them during their studies. There must be space for developing an open mind and critical thinking. A more liberalized approach to curricula would be invaluable in helping students discover their true passions. Finally, significant emphasis must be placed on developing superior communication and interpersonal skills by redesigning pedagogy and evaluation methods to facilitate these outcomes.

Enabling Individuals to Discover Their Unique Strengths

Many employers also perpetuate this "job-seeking" approach to education. While this model produces a high volume of low-cost, specialized labour that may satisfy corporate recruitment needs in the short term, it is ultimately counterproductive. It neither allows individuals to reach their full potential nor enables companies to remain competitive in the long run, as a workforce trained purely for rote tasks often lacks productivity, innovation, and robust problem-solving capabilities. Such graduates frequently lack higher-order thinking skills. This raises a critical question: how can educational institutions effectively address this systemic deficiency?

Addressing this problem requires a fundamental reorientation of curriculum design. We must recognise that the primary goal of a curriculum should be to enable students to discover and cultivate their unique strengths and passions, even as they acquire the necessary "job-seeking" competencies within a degree program. To achieve this, several structural features must be implemented. First, individuals must have the flexibility to pursue subjects based on their personal interests. Curricula should be designed to allow students to "mix and match" diverse subjects, effectively constructing their own academic pathways.

For instance, a student might major in financial markets while concurrently choosing elective courses in Indian literature and aesthetics, perspectives from the *Rāmāyaṇa* or *Mahābhārata*, an appreciation of *sāhitya* (literature), and selected works of Kālidāsa. Such a combination reflects a profound interest in literature and linguistics alongside technical expertise. Another student might combine comparative philosophy with business statistics and the natural language processing aspects of Sanskrit grammar. A curriculum that facilitates such interdisciplinary possibilities is far more likely to produce graduates characterised by self-confidence and intellectual satisfaction.

Furthermore, a broad spectrum of foundational inputs should be provided before deep specialization occurs. This requires breaking the traditional boundaries between disparate subject areas. There is no inherent reason why *Samśkr̥tam*, Ancient Indian Knowledge Systems, and *Sāhitya* cannot be integrated with Accounting, Marketing, and Financial Management. Similarly, a student specializing in Psychology should not be precluded from taking courses in basic mathematical thinking, Business, Government, and Society, *Nīti Śāstras* (treatises on ethics/policy), and aesthetics. These diverse options encourage the mind-expanding experimentation that is crucial to true learning.

Finally, curriculum design must provide ample opportunities for self-experimentation and deep immersion in selected topics, both individually and in groups. This allows students to solidify their belief systems while developing teamwork and a collaborative spirit. Through these interactions, they learn to articulate their ideas and beliefs effectively in various settings. This shift necessitates innovative evaluation mechanisms, such as opportunities for critical thinking, independent research, and the completion of a formal dissertation.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The Government of India responded to the limitations of the existing system through the National Education Policy (**NEP 2020**). This policy proposed significant structural changes in higher education to foster a more holistic developmental model. First, it encouraged interdisciplinary inputs to ensure students remain gainfully employed. In equal measure, it promoted opportunities to cultivate an open mind and critical thinking. Finally, it placed substantial emphasis on developing superior communication and interpersonal skills. The operational principle behind these changes was the provision of "substantial flexibility," allowing students to "mix and match" from available courses. Consequently, NEP 2020 advocated for student autonomy in choosing curricula, subjects, and skill sets.

According to the policy, a fundamental principle of the education system includes "a rootedness and pride in India, and its rich, diverse, ancient and modern culture and knowledge systems and traditions" (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, instilling an understanding of India's technological needs, artistic traditions, and ethical frameworks is considered critical for fostering national pride, self-confidence, and social integration (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 4). Central to this vision is the Indian Knowledge System (**IKS**), which provides the essential "inputs for life" argued for in this paper.

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS)

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) comprises a corpus of ideas that enable individuals to lead lives characterised by happiness, contentment, and self-evolution. Within the *Sanātana Dharma* tradition, there is a structured classification known as the Caturdaśa-vidyā-sthānam. This repository outlines:

- Core principles of life (**Śruti**)

- Specific instructions for ethical living (**Smṛtis**)
- Guidelines for conduct and righteousness (**Dharma Śāstras**)
- Detailed narratives and historical precedents illustrating implementation challenges (**Purāṇas** and **Itihāsas**)
- Scientific and management principles for practical application, found across the literature and within the **Upavedas**.

No society can afford to disregard the intellectual heritage of its ancestors. To do so is naïve and risks leaving a population culturally "displaced." One might only justify discarding ancestral knowledge if the progenitors of that knowledge were proven to be illogical or myopic. However, recent studies have well-documented the sophisticated contributions of Indian ancestors in fields such as Mathematics, Astronomy, and Science (Mahadevan et al., 2022; Subbarayappa, 1982; Sen and Shukla, 2000; Joseph, 2016). Ignoring these contributions forces a society to "reinvent the wheel" through redundant experimentation. Furthermore, there are compelling geopolitical and economic reasons to remain aware of ancestral Indian knowledge, particularly within the emerging Intellectual Property Rights (**IPR**) regime. This global framework rewards those who can demonstrate prior access to useful knowledge through patents and copyrights. If a nation erases its collective memory based on flimsy critiques—such as labeling the study of IKS as "thrusting religious ideas"—it faces a strategic disadvantage.

Without a firm grasp of our historical knowledge, we will either fight losing legal battles or helplessly submit to global rules that favor those who have claimed our traditional innovations. A clear case in point is the IPR disputes regarding Basmati rice, turmeric, and various pharmaceutical applications (Jayaraman, 1997). In many of these instances, India has struggled

to defend its heritage. The most effective way to resolve this logjam is to ensure that the populace is adequately educated in ancestral Indian knowledge.

The Art of "Man-Making"

Swami Chinmayananda, also known as Pujya Gurudev, made a lasting contribution to the field of education. His ideas on education can be summarised as “the Art of Man-Making.” According to him, an educational institution is not merely a place to provide data and technical jargon; instead, it should reveal the inherent beauty and potential a student already possesses. A teacher should help students think independently and equip them with the art of educating themselves. He believed that the goal of education is not just to churn out productive workers, but happy and fulfilled human beings.

Pujya Gurudev unravelled his vision for education and the necessity of holistic development in several of his works (see, for example, Swami Chinmayananda, 1992, 2004, 2008, 2015). He emphasised the importance of "mind control" and "mental development" as essential components for a student's success in life. A comprehensive coverage of his ideas on education can be found in a compilation of 114 talks originally broadcast on All India Radio, focusing on how the *Bhagavad Gītā* can be used to build character and resilience in youth (Swami Chinmayananda, 2008).

In a nutshell, Swami Chinmayananda's educational model was built upon four foundational pillars designed to create "integrated" individuals. First, it focused on the integrated development of an individual in terms of the physical, mental, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. According to Pujya Gurudev, a nation unaware of its culture is like an orphan who does not know its parents. Therefore, the second aspect of education focused on Indian culture.

Gurudev also believed in fostering a sense of civic consciousness and pride in being Indian. He wanted to encourage students to put the motherland before self-interest; therefore, inculcating patriotism was an essential part of the education. Finally, in order to prepare the students as responsible global citizens, emphasis was laid on developing a universal outlook through education.

Other contemporary spiritual masters held a similar view to that of Pujya Gurudev. A central theme in the works of Swami Vivekananda is the development of a resilient character among the youth. He advocated for an educational system that is truly "man-making," which he defined as the "manifestation of the perfection already in man." A close examination of Vivekananda's life and teachings reveals that the goal of man-making education is to cultivate an inner strength and moral compass that enables a meaningful and contented life. In a letter to his Madras disciples on November 19, 1894, Vivekananda explained that neither wealth, nor name, nor fame, nor mere pragmatic learning suffices; rather, it is love and character that "cleave [their] way through adamant walls of difficulties" (Swami Vivekananda, 2006).

Transformative Role of Education

While the spiritual masters talk about "man-making" education, the specific outcomes and benefits of this process for the individual are often under-analysed. In the contemporary context, "lion-like courage" and "sympathy" are often viewed as mutually exclusive. Courage is frequently misinterpreted as the brute force required to "bulldoze" obstacles—a quality that borders on the *āsuric* (demonic) tendencies described in Chapter 16 of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (Swami Chinmayananda, 2002). Conversely, virtues such as sympathy and compassion are sometimes misperceived as indicators of weakness or marginalization. Reconciling these

apparent contradictions is essential to understanding the holistic character-building envisioned by the great seers.

Strength and Gentleness

The first attribute of a person of high character is the coexistence of strength and gentleness. Common perception often equates gentleness with feebleness or an inability to challenge injustice. Conversely, "strength" is typically associated with physical prowess, financial resources, or political influence—entities pertaining to the "world without." However, in the Vivekananda tradition, strength and gentleness are qualities of the "world within." Such an individual possesses the "heart of a lion," deriving infinite strength from internal conviction.

When strength is used for oppression or the subordination of others, it indicates a failure of character development. In contrast, a fully developed character manifests profound gentleness. This gentleness arises from a vision of "oneness," allowing the individual to see the divine in all creation. In this state, diverse opinions and individuals are accommodated even amidst disagreement, and efforts to transform unacceptable social conditions are driven by a positive, constructive mindset.

Broadmindedness and Faith

The second pillar of character is the synthesis of broadmindedness with intense faith. Today, these are often seen as contradictory; religious or philosophical faith is frequently equated with narrow-mindedness, while broadmindedness is thought to require the abandonment of conviction. This trajectory of non-belief often leads to increased suspicion and a self-centered view of life. Such an individual may adopt a "my way or the highway" approach, which is a symptom of a fragmented character rather than a liberated one.

True broadmindedness leads to the acceptance of alternative viewpoints. When viewed through this lens, the exclusionary aspects of faith disappear. For a character to mature, one needs deep conviction—*śraddhā*—in principles such as a *dhārmic* way of life and the existence of a transcendent reality. Faith is a fundamental internal strength; it emboldens the individual to pursue the common good and serves as a lone companion during life's most difficult trials. As Śrī Kṛṣṇa proclaims in Chapter 17 of the *Gītā*, faith is fundamental to human existence and critically shapes our character (Swami Ranganathananda, 2003). We witness this naturally in our daily lives; we trust a physician's prescription or a lawyer's counsel based on a value judgment of their character. Trust, therefore, is not a weakness but a functional strength.

Fearlessness and Compassion

Fear is a pervasive barrier to growth, ranging from the fear of losing material possessions to the fear of social displacement. True fearlessness—*abhayam*—is not achieved through external security, such as bodyguards or armaments, which are often sought when the inner self is weak. Instead, the cultivation of the inner self releases latent energy that can be channelled toward productive ends. As this energy is released, the individual becomes more compassionate. This dual state of fearlessness and compassion is described in Chapter 12 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: "यस्मात् नोद्विजते लोको लोकान्नोद्विजते च यः" (*yasmāt nodvijate loko lokānnodvijate ca yaḥ*) (Swami Ranganathananda, 2003, pp 23-24). This describes an individual who neither causes fear in the world nor is himself fearful of the world. During the dialogue between Sage Yājñavalkya (*Yājñavalkya*) and King Janaka, the sage concludes, "अभयं वै जनकं प्राप्तोऽसीति" (*abhayaṁ vai janakaṁ prāpto'sīti*), signifying that Janaka had attained the state of true

fearlessness (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.2.4) (Swami Madhavananda, 1997, Swami Krishnananda).

Modern history provides striking examples of this character in action. Baba Amte, born into wealth and a legal career, renounced his property to serve those afflicted by leprosy. His encounter with a suffering person in a gutter transformed his life, leading to the foundation of the Warora Maharogi Seva Samiti (*Anandwan*) in 1951—a community built by those formerly cast out by society (Mehrotra, 2010). Similarly, Narayanan Krishnan, at age 19, abandoned a promising international culinary career to care for the destitute in Madurai after witnessing the plight of a homeless man near the Meenakshi temple (Akshaya Trust). These lives demonstrate the profound transformation that occurs when "man-making" education translates into a character defined by the union of strength, faith, and compassion.

Conclusions

While gainful employment provides material comfort, it is insufficient to produce fulfilled and satisfied individuals. The cultivation of professionals who are simultaneously happy, resilient, and passionate requires a concerted investment in character-building. Individuals with such a foundation do more than succeed; they leave an indelible mark on their chosen fields and serve as the essential building blocks of a flourishing society.

The preeminent advantage of a strong character is the psychological and spiritual resilience it provides against the vicissitudes of life. An individual anchored in character remains unperturbed by life's inevitable fluctuations—the "upswings and downswings." This fosters a profound sense of equanimity, allowing one to engage in their vocation with undistracted focus and purpose. Ultimately, this internal stability forms the bedrock for broader societal prosperity.

By reorienting our focus toward these values, we can restore the true purpose of education. We must shift the paradigm from the contemporary reality of "या विद्या सा नियुक्तये" (*yā vidyā sā niyuktaye*)—an education merely for securing a livelihood—back to its original, sublime prescription: "या विद्या सा विमुक्तये" (*yā vidyā sā vimuktaye*)—an education that truly liberates.

References

1. **Akshaya Trust.** (n.d.). *Helping the helpless*. (Accessed July 30, 2025).
2. **Fry, L. W., & Cohen, M. P.** (2009). Spiritual leadership as a paradigm for organizational transformation and recovery from extended work hours cultures. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 84(Suppl2), 265–278.
3. **Jayaraman, K.** (1997). U.S. Patent Office withdraws patent on Indian herb. *Nature*, 389(6).
4. **Joseph, G. G.** (2016). *Indian mathematics: Engaging with the world from ancient to modern times* (pp. 97–114). World Scientific.
5. **Mahadevan, B., Bhat, V.R., and Nagendra Pavana, R.** (2022). *Introduction to Indian Knowledge System: Concepts and Applications*. Delhi, PHI Learning.
6. **Marques, J.** (2011). Spirituality, meaning, interbeing, leadership, and empathy: SMILE, *Interbeing*, 4 (2) (2011), pp. 7-17
7. **Mehrotra, R.** (2010). Work builds, charity destroys. In *Ennoble: English course book, second year pre-university* (pp. 63–70). The Karnataka Textbook Society.
8. **Ministry of Education.** (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.
9. **Sen, S. N., and Shukla, K. S.** (2000). *History of astronomy in India* (2nd ed.). Indian National Science Academy.

10. **Subbarayappa, B. V.** (1982). Glimpses of science and technology in ancient and mediaeval India. *Endeavour*, 6(4), 177–182.
11. **Swami Chinmayananda.** (2008). *The art of man-making: Talks on the Bhagavad Geeta*. Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.
12. **Swami Chinmayananda.** (2015). *Manifesting Divinity: Chinmaya Vision on Education*. Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.
13. **Swami Chinmayananda.** (2004). *Kindle Life*. Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.
14. **Swami Chinmayananda.** (2002). *The holy Geeta*. Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.
15. **Swami Chinmayananda.** (1992). *Self-Unfoldment*. Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.
16. **Swami Krishnananda.** (n.d.). *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Divine Life Society. (Accessed July 30, 2025).
17. **Swami Madhavananda.** (Trans.). (1997). *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Advaita Ashrama.
18. **Swami Ranganathananda.** (2003). *Universal message of the Bhagavad Gita* (Vol. 3). Advaita Ashrama.
19. **Swami Vivekananda.** (2006). *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*. Advaita Ashrama.