



HOLISTIC LEARNING: THE CASE FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SECULAR FRAMEWORKS

Javad Ahmad Mir¹, Iqbal Malik², Shabir Ahmad Lone³

^{*1}Contractual Assistant Professor at GDC, Pampore, Jammu and Kashmir

²Assistant Professor, Islamic Studies at GDC Pampore, J &K

³Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University, Tamil Nadu, India

Email id: javadahmad554@gmail.com, driqbalmalik11@gmail.com, loneshabir714@gmail.com

Correspondence email: javadahmad554@gmail.com

Received : 06 February 2025

Revised : 28 February 2025

Accepted : 12 March 2025

Published : 08 April 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.59733/jishup.v3i2.127>

Publish Link : <https://jishup.org/index.php/ojs>

Abstract

The incorporation of faith-based education within secular institutions remains a subject of significant debate, as it seeks to balance inclusivity and pluralism with concerns over religious neutrality. This study examines the rationale, benefits, and challenges of integrating religious education into secular settings, particularly in the context of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Rather than fostering division, religious education contributes to ethical development, social harmony, and cultural understanding. By instilling moral values and promoting interfaith dialogue, it enhances national knowledge systems and supports holistic learning. However, challenges such as fears of indoctrination, curriculum resistance, and ensuring fair representation of diverse religious perspectives complicate its integration. The NEP 2020's focus on value-based and multidisciplinary education provides an opportunity to incorporate religious education within a secular framework. Drawing from academic literature, government reports, and expert perspectives, this research highlights the potential of religious education to strengthen the moral and intellectual foundations of society. It also emphasizes addressing challenges through transparent policies, inclusive curriculum development, and structured teacher training. This study employs qualitative methods, including regressive analysis, to offer a comprehensive exploration of the topic.

Keywords: *Religious education, Secular institutions, inclusivity, Value-based education, Multidisciplinary curriculum*

Introduction

People widely acknowledge the importance of education in shaping individual and communal values. Education includes not only academic achievement but also the holistic development of individuals, encompassing their ethical and moral growth. The incorporation of religious teaching within secular educational institutions in India, a nation characterized by multiculturalism and religious diversity, has sparked both intrigue and debate. This study examines the historical and contemporary contexts of religious education, assessing its necessity and significance, particularly in relation to the NEP 2020 framework. People often view secular educational institutions as environments that prioritize neutrality and objectivity, with no explicit focus on religious instruction. The absence of religious education may lead to an inadequate understanding of cultural and ethical diversity, which is essential in today's global setting. In countries where religion profoundly influences cultural behaviors and social norms, excluding religious education from the curriculum may result in a disconnect between academic knowledge and real-world applications. Adding religious education to nonreligious schools is meant to help people understand other religions, build community, and teach morals, not to promote a particular religion (Singh, 2019). Religious education enables pupils to critically evaluate ethical dilemmas, appreciate many perspectives, and foster empathy for individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds. This is particularly relevant in India, where religious diversity functions as both an advantage and a challenge.

The NEP 2020 stresses the significance of value-based and cross-disciplinary education. This presents a unique chance to change the function of religious education in secular settings. By highlighting universal principles such as compassion, justice, and mutual respect, religious education cultivates a more inclusive and ethically robust society. This study investigates the effective execution of this technique while addressing potential issues, ensuring that religious education enhances rather than destroys the secular framework of educational institutions.

Historical Context and Need for Religious Education

Religious education has been essential to conventional educational institutions globally, serving as a foundational basis for societal ethical and moral standards. The Gurukul system in ancient India prioritized the integration of education with spiritual and intellectual guidance. These institutions offered religious instruction and emphasized character formation, discipline, and moral behavior. Similarly, Islamic madrasas significantly contributed to intellectual and moral development by providing a comprehensive educational framework that integrated religious studies with disciplines such as medicine, astronomy, and philosophy (Kumar, 2020). During the colonial period, the focus on education shifted towards secularism, influenced by Western models. The British established a more fragmented educational system, prioritizing secular subjects above religious instruction to meet administrative and commercial goals. This alteration instigated a secular emphasis in education, which was further solidified post-independence when India emerged as a secular state. The implementation of the educational system guaranteed religious impartiality, privileging no particular belief above others. This approach intended to preserve the secular ethos but inadvertently overlooked the moral and ethical dimensions of education.

Despite the historical shift towards secularism, the importance of religious education persists. The imperative for moral and ethical education has become increasingly apparent in contemporary society. Accelerated globalization, technological advancement, and changing social dynamics have produced challenges such as ethical ambiguity, cultural misinterpretations, and increasing societal conflicts. A 2022 nationwide study on education revealed that 78% of instructors assert that incorporating ethical lessons from religious traditions can significantly enhance pupils' moral and ethical growth. These findings underscore the ability of religious education to foster socially responsible and ethically principled individuals. A primary justification for integrating religious education is its ability to address moral deterioration. Modern communities face obstacles such as corruption, deception, and inadequate accountability—problems stemming from the erosion of ethical standards.

Religious education can provide students with a moral foundation, equipping them to tackle complex ethical dilemmas in personal and professional settings. Religious education cultivates character development and responsible citizenship by prioritizing honesty, compassion, and respect for others. The increasing diversity of modern societies has made interfaith understanding and cultural knowledge significant educational priorities. Inclusive religious education fosters respect for many religions and traditions, reduces biases, and promotes social harmony. It allows students to identify common values across other faiths while recognizing and valuing their distinctions, so creating a basis for collaborative harmony in multicultural environments.

The historical context highlights the preservation of cultural heritage through religious education. Ancient educational institutions conveyed religious doctrines and safeguarded cultural traditions, transferring knowledge, arts, and customs to future generations. In an era of rapid cultural homogenization, religious education helps preserve individual identities while simultaneously fostering a sense of global citizenship. Students familiar with the ethical principles of many religions get a broader perspective, appreciating their cultural heritage and global diversity. Based on these historical and contemporary observations, it is evident that the exclusion of religious education from secular institutions leads to a lack of holistic learning. The ideals of secularism are vital for maintaining impartiality and eradicating bias; yet, they should not hinder the integration of moral and ethical teachings from diverse religious traditions. A fair technique that respects secular ideals while addressing students' ethical and cultural needs can improve the educational experience.

The historical evolution of religious education demonstrates its enduring importance. From ancient Gurukuls and Madrasas to modern secular classrooms, the primary objective of education has consistently been the holistic development of individuals. Integrating religious education into secular institutions, grounded in constitutional and secular principles, enables educators to harmonize moral instruction with intellectual learning. This approach prepares students for professional achievement while fostering ethical leadership and accountable global citizenship.

Theoretical Framework

Adding religious education to nonreligious schools can be looked at from different theoretical angles, each giving a different view of the problems and issues involved. The liberal perspective emphasizes individual autonomy and highlights the importance of enabling students to make informed decisions based on their beliefs and values. Rawls (1971) asserts that education should provide pupils with the intellectual tools necessary to critically evaluate other perspectives and develop their own ethical and moral stances. This perspective aligns with the notion of religious education that abstains from promoting any specific faith while familiarizing students with other religious and philosophical traditions. This empowers students to navigate their personal and social lives with increased knowledge and autonomy. The multicultural perspective advocates for the integration of diverse religious traditions into the curriculum to promote cultural understanding and social cohesion. Banks (2008) asserts that education in multicultural contexts must acknowledge the cultural and religious diversity of students in order to foster mutual respect and harmony. The integration of religious education in secular institutions can help bridge communal differences, reduce biases, and foster dialogue. This approach is particularly relevant in a country like India, where religious plurality is a core element of the social structure.

The holistic education approach emphasizes the all-encompassing development of individuals, including their intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and ethical attributes. Miller (2010) contends that education should engage the whole individual, promoting self-awareness, empathy, and ethical reasoning. Religious education, from a holistic perspective, fosters students' spiritual development and enhances their feeling of purpose and interconnectedness. This concept asserts that education should prepare students for professional success and responsible, significant participation in society. The constructivist perspective posits that learning is an active, contextualized process of knowledge production rather than simple acquisition. This viewpoint asserts that in religious education, students should interact with religious and ethical ideas through critical thinking, dialogue, and experiential learning. This approach allows students to cultivate their understanding of moral and spiritual ideals, fostering a deeper connection with ethical principles. The interdisciplinary method emphasizes the integration of religious education with other academic fields, such as history, literature, and philosophy.

This perspective aligns with the NEP 2020's promotion of multidisciplinary education, enabling students to explore religious and ethical topics within a context that highlights their importance to human culture and civilization. This method improves the curriculum while maintaining the secular tenets of educational institutions. By using these theoretical frameworks, adding religious education to nonreligious schools can be planned in a way that respects nonreligious values and meets the moral, cultural, and spiritual needs of the students. These points of view give us a solid basis for comprehending how difficult it is to teach religion, and they also show how it has the potential to enhance the complete growth of individuals and the progress of a unified and welcoming society.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. The aim of this study is to examine the importance of religious education in promoting ethical and cultural advancement.
2. The aim of this study is to examine the difficulties related to the integration of religious education within secular institutions.
3. The third objective is to assess the extent of religious education within the framework of NEP 2020.
4. To propose solutions for integrating religious education while maintaining secular values.

Benefits of Integrating Religious Education

1. **Moral Advancement:** Religious education provides a solid moral foundation, enabling youngsters to differentiate between right and wrong. Introducing students to universal ethical values found in various religious traditions, such as honesty, empathy, and accountability, cultivates essential skills for both personal and professional development. (Gundara, 2015) contends that religious education fosters critical moral reasoning, empowering students to confront ethical dilemmas with thoughtfulness and integrity.
2. Religious education promotes tolerance and respect for other faiths among various groups; hence, it increases societal harmony and interfaith understanding. It promotes interreligious conversation and comprehension, mitigating biases and preconceptions that frequently result in societal disputes. Parekh (2006) asserts that instructing children about

- many faith traditions and their common tenets promotes a unified and harmonious community. This is particularly vital in multicultural settings, where reciprocal respect is crucial for maintaining social stability.
3. Religious education serves as a channel between generations, preserving cultural heritage and traditions. It enables students to connect with their heritage, offering them a deep understanding of their cultural identity. Concurrently, it broadens their viewpoints by introducing youngsters to the concepts and customs of various cultures, fostering a sense of global citizenship. Singh (2019) asserts that the dual role of religious education enriches individual cultural identity while promoting cultural exchange and mutual respect.
 4. By incorporating spiritual and ethical dimensions into learning, religious education enhances holistic education, enriching both academic and extracurricular activities in schools and promoting the overall development of students. Miller (2010) contends that holistic education, which includes spiritual growth, prepares students to live meaningful lives and engage with the world ethically. Integrating religious education within secular institutions offers students a holistic education that promotes intellectual and moral growth. Religious education demonstrates its ability to enrich the educational experience, preparing students for academic success and ethical leadership in a multicultural and interconnected society.

OBSTACLES IN INTEGRATING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

- I. Concerns Pertaining to Indoctrination Critics argue that incorporating religious education in secular institutions may inadvertently lead to indoctrination or the promotion of specific religious doctrines. This issue stems from the potential misuse of spiritual teachings to impose particular ideologies on students, so compromising the secular foundations of educational institutions. Kumar (2020) highlights that these concerns are particularly salient in heterogeneous societies where maintaining neutrality is crucial. The objective is to guarantee that religious education promotes critical thinking and ethical principles rather than encouraging dogmatism or exclusivity.
- II. Curriculum and logistical factors Developing an inclusive curriculum that accurately represents the diversity of religious traditions presents a significant challenge. This is complex since religious teachings must be presented equitably and comprehensively, without bias towards any particular belief system. Furthermore, practical difficulties, such as educating proficient educators and distributing adequate resources, pose significant barriers. The National Education Report (2021) emphasizes that the lack of educated educators skilled in teaching multi-religious courses presents a substantial barrier. Moreover, developing appropriate instructional resources and securing funding for these programs intensifies the logistical challenges faced by educational institutions.
- III. Maintaining secular neutrality necessitates meticulous preparation to harmonize religious education with secular principles, ensuring that biases or favoritism do not permeate the curriculum or pedagogical approaches. This involves establishing rules and protocols that maintain a clear distinction between religious education and religious indoctrination. Gundara (2015) asserts that secular neutrality can be achieved solely when educational institutions adopt an inclusive approach that respects all perspectives without favoring any particular faith. The objective is to establish a system in which religious education fosters cultural awareness and mutual tolerance, while safeguarding the institution's neutrality.
- IV. The religious pluralism of India necessitates the inclusion of diverse viewpoints in religious education. Effectively and fairly reflecting the beliefs and behaviors of many cultures presents significant challenges. Banks (2008) contends that producing material that authentically reflects the diversity of religious traditions, free from oversimplification or misrepresentation, requires comprehensive research and professional teamwork. The curriculum sometimes overlooks the inclusion of obscure or minority religious traditions, resulting in representation deficiencies and potential biases. This variation underscores the need for a refined and informed approach to religious education in various groups.

Addressing the challenges

1. Frameworks, Legal Safeguards Robust, and comprehensive policy frameworks are essential to ensure that religious education is inclusive, non-discriminatory, and aligned with constitutional standards. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 creates a framework for integrating ethical and moral education in accordance with secular ideals. Through the implementation of legal safeguards, educational institutions can avert potential biases or the promotion of specific ideologies. These regulations must emphasize accountability and transparency in curriculum development

- and implementation, ensuring that religion education serves to foster unity and cultural understanding rather than discord.
2. **Holistic Curriculum Development** Developing a curriculum that integrates ethical principles from various different traditions without promoting any specific faith is crucial for creating an inclusive atmosphere. Kumar (2020) underscores the need of focusing on universal moral concepts such as compassion, justice, and mutual respect, which are prevalent throughout all major religions. A well-structured curriculum enables students to explore the ethical and intellectual sides of religion, promoting critical thinking and an appreciation for diversity. Furthermore, integrating historical and cultural contexts may increase students' understanding of the contributions of many religious systems to human civilization.
 3. **Educator Training and Advancement** Training educators to teach religion with compassion and expertise is crucial for effective implementation. Singh (2019) emphasizes the imperative for comprehensive teacher training programs that focus on cultural competence, interfaith dialogue, and conflict resolution. Educators must be equipped to address delicate topics, manage diverse classroom dynamics, and foster mutual respect and open communication. Continuous professional development programs enable educators to stay educated about best practices and emerging trends in religious education, so ensuring their efficacy and impartiality as learning facilitators.
 4. **Involvement of Community and Stakeholders** Engaging parents, religious leaders, and community members is crucial for cultivating trust and support for religious education initiatives. The National Survey on Education (2022) underscores the imperative of fostering collaboration among stakeholders to ensure that religious education corresponds with the values and needs of the community. Transparent communication and consultation can mitigate concerns, elucidate misunderstandings, and cultivate a feeling of ownership among stakeholders. Furthermore, integrating diverse viewpoints in the decision-making process may enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of religious education programs. Consistent feedback mechanisms and community-focused seminars can improve these programs by promoting transparency and continuous improvement.

Scope of Religious Education in Secular Institutions under NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for a transformational educational framework that integrates value-based and transdisciplinary learning. This method generates significant prospects for incorporating religious education into secular institutions, provided it adheres to constitutional principles and maintains inclusivity.

1. Education emphasizes values and multidisciplinary methodologies. The NEP 2020 emphasizes value-based education, so it creates a strong basis for integrating religious and ethical teachings into the curriculum. The plan aligns with the core aims of Catholic education by highlighting universal virtues such as integrity, compassion, and social equity. Religious concepts can serve as a significant resource for cultivating moral ideas that transcend individual beliefs, assisting students in establishing a strong ethical foundation. Moral science, civic education, and environmental studies can integrate ethical concepts from spiritual traditions, fostering holistic development.

2. Ethics and human values as essential components: A core tenet of NEP 2020 underscores the need of ethics and human values as integral components of education. This alignment offers an opportunity to integrate religious education to promote moral development and social responsibility. By analyzing ethical concepts from diverse spiritual traditions, students can develop an advanced understanding of morality and its application in varied social contexts. This method improves the educational experience and prepares students to tackle complex ethical dilemmas with equity and empathy.

3. Prospects for Interdisciplinary Approaches: The transdisciplinary framework of NEP 2020 facilitates the incorporation of religious instruction into broader academic disciplines. Historical accounts can incorporate the ethical principles of religions, offering insights into the influence of faith on the development of civilizations. Literature and philosophy courses can also analyze religious philosophy, promoting critical thinking and intellectual inquiry. Gundara (2015) asserts that multidisciplinary approaches enhance the importance of religious education and assist students in forming significant connections between ethical principles and their academic pursuits. Educational institutions can cultivate a holistic and integrated learning experience by situating religious instruction within wider educational contexts.

4. Fostering interfaith dialogue and cultural understanding: The pluralistic framework of NEP 2020 advocates for interfaith dialogue and cultural understanding as fundamental components of education. Religious education cultivates mutual respect and comprehension among students from diverse backgrounds. By fostering discussions on shared values and collective ethical norms, educational institutions can create a supportive environment in which students build an

appreciation for diversity. This approach promotes social cohesion and prepares students to positively engage in a multicultural society.

5. Correcting misconceptions and stereotypes: Incorporating religious education into secular classrooms provides a method to correct misconceptions and preconceptions about other faiths. Students can get a deeper understanding of diverse ideas and behaviors through accurate and fair representations of various cultures. Such activities can reduce bias and foster a culture of tolerance and acceptance, essential for harmonious coexistence in a pluralistic society.

6. Adhering to Global Educational Trends: The integration of religious education in secular schools aligns with global educational trends that emphasize holistic and values-based learning. Many countries have successfully incorporated ethical principles from many spiritual traditions into their educational curricula, demonstrating the feasibility and benefits of these initiatives. By employing these strategies, India may enhance the global competitiveness of its educational system while preserving its cultural and spiritual traditions. In summary, the NEP 2020 offers a comprehensive framework for integrating religious education within secular institutions while upholding constitutional values and promoting tolerance. Religious education can significantly improve the holistic development of students by focusing on universal ethics, multidisciplinary approaches, and cultural understanding. Successful implementation requires careful planning, stakeholder engagement, and compliance with secular principles. Adopting these principles allows religious education to serve as an effective tool for fostering moral development, societal cohesion, and global citizenship.

DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

Integrating religious education within secular schools has considerable potential to enhance students' moral and intellectual development. It provides a framework for cultivating ethical reasoning, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking, which are vital for global citizenship. Realizing this convergence requires a measured approach that respects secular principles while recognizing the variety of religious traditions. Comparative case studies from countries like the United Kingdom and Singapore underscore the necessity for well-defined legislative frameworks and extensive teacher training programs. In the UK, religious education is mandatory in schools, focusing on imparting knowledge about other religions rather than promoting a certain faith. This approach fosters an inclusive educational environment that encourages students to explore ethical and philosophical questions. Similarly, Singapore's model emphasizes the instruction of shared values among diverse faith communities, promoting social cohesiveness and mutual respect. Despite challenges such as the apprehension of brainwashing, complexities within the curriculum, and practical constraints, these issues are not insurmountable. Collaborative efforts among educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders are crucial for effectively addressing these challenges. Engaging parents and religious leaders in the development and execution of the curriculum promotes trust and ensures representation. Furthermore, investing in teacher training programs that prioritize cultural competence and interfaith cooperation could enhance the quality of religious education.

The NEP 2020 creates a conducive framework for integrating religious education into India's secular institutions. Schools can offer a balanced curriculum that encourages moral growth while upholding secular principles by combining these programs with the policy's focus on value-based and multidisciplinary education. This integration necessitates continuous oversight, feedback mechanisms, and adherence to constitutional norms to ensure its efficacy. The integration of religious education within secular institutions poses both obstacles and opportunities. By means of careful planning, inclusive policies, and collaborative activities, it is possible to create an educational environment that fosters ethical development, cultural understanding, and social cohesion. This approach improves the educational experience and prepares students to navigate the complexities of a diverse and interconnected society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We propose the following recommendations to facilitate the efficient integration of religious education:

1. **Policy Reforms and Legal Safeguards:** Governments and educational authorities must establish clear policies and legal frameworks that ensure religious education is inclusive, non-discriminatory, and aligned with constitutional norms.
2. **Inclusive Curriculum Design:** The curriculum should prioritize ethical and moral education derived from several religious traditions without endorsing a singular faith. This approach fosters appreciation for diversity and promotes mutual understanding.

3. Educator Training and Capacity Development: Instructors must have the essential knowledge and skills to deliver religious education with compassion and professionalism. Training programs must include instructional approaches that respect diversity and uphold secular principles.
4. Community and Stakeholder Engagement: Parents, religious leaders, and community members must be actively involved in the development and implementation of religious education programs. Their participation ensures transparency and cultivates trust in the system.
5. Interdisciplinary Approaches: Religious education ought to be integrated into broader fields such as history, literature, and philosophy to provide students with a contextual understanding of its relevance and significance.
6. Systematic Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms: Educational institutions must establish processes to continuously assess the efficacy of religious education programs and include feedback from students, educators, and stakeholders. Applying these concepts can improve the incorporation of religious education in secular institutions, promoting a more holistic and inclusive educational experience. These efforts will prepare students for academic success and meaningful engagement in a diverse and interconnected global environment. Ultimately, intentional policies and practices guided by religious education can establish a basis for fostering ethical, empathetic, and socially responsible individuals.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating religious instruction within secular schools is an essential requirement and a viable option in modern education. The primary aim of this integration is to promote ethical development, foster social harmony, and cultivate cultural understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. Recognizing that religious education has the power to change lives, it is important to include it in a way that respects and upholds the secular principles of schools. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 serves as a vital framework for enabling this integration. The NEP 2020 supports value-based and multidisciplinary education, which makes it easier to include moral and religious lessons in the school curriculum while still upholding the institutions' secular principles. The method prioritizes ethics, human values, and multidisciplinary approaches, creating a solid framework for developing well-rounded individuals adept at negotiating the complexities of a multicultural and diverse society. We should not overlook the challenges, despite the considerable advantages. These include concerns about indoctrination, challenges in curriculum design, logistical difficulties, and the imperative of maintaining secular neutrality. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. Regulatory frameworks, teacher training programs, and strong community engagement can help religious education fit in well with secular institutions, as shown by comparative studies from places like the UK and Singapore.

REFERENCES

- Banks, J. A. (2008). *Diversity and citizenship education: Global perspectives*. Wiley.
- Gundara, J. S. (2015). *Interculturalism, education and inclusion*. SAGE Publications.
- Kumar, R. (2020). *Educational reforms in modern India*. Routledge.
- Miller, J. P. (2010). *Whole child education: The way forward*. University of Toronto Press.
- National Education Report. (2021). *Annual review of education in India*. Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- National Survey on Education. (2022). *Ethics in education: A national perspective*. Indian Council of Educational Research.
- NEP 2020. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- Parekh, B. (2006). *Rethinking multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Singh, K. (2019). *Religious education in a secular state*. Oxford University Press.