

Gurukul-Based Education under IKS and the Finnish Education System: A Comparative Analysis of Philosophies, Pedagogy, and Contemporary Relevance

Dr. Mithu Roy, Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Gauhati Commerce College, Guwahati – 21,

Abstract

This paper examines and compares two contrasting yet philosophically aligned education paradigms — the traditional Indian gurukul model rooted in IKS, and the Finnish public education model. While the gurukul system draws on ancient Indian epistemologies emphasizing holistic development, ethical formation, and close teacher-student relationships, the Finnish system emphasizes equity, teacher professionalism, learner autonomy, minimal standardized testing, and child-centred learning. The NEP 2020 of India is highly oriented towards holistic education. The Finnish education system highlights its success through a student centred and personalised learning paths with emphasis on holistic development. By analysing their origins, pedagogical philosophies, structure, strengths and limitations, the study offers insights into how features from both models could inform future educational reforms — especially in multicultural, densely populated societies like India — to foster holistic, inclusive, and sustainable learning.

Keywords: Gurukul, Finnish, Holistic, Education

1. Introduction

The global discourse on education reform increasingly highlights the limitations of industrial, exam-oriented schooling systems, prompting interest in alternative paradigms that foster holistic development, creativity, wellbeing, and lifelong learning. In this context, two systems stand out: the ancient Indian gurukul tradition, now being revisited through the framework of IKS; and the modern Finnish education model, globally lauded for its equity and learner-centricity.

The concept of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represents a revival and institutional recognition of India's indigenous pedagogical, philosophical, scientific and cultural traditions.

Concurrently, the Finnish Education System — grounded in egalitarian principles, teacher professionalism, and learner wellbeing — is frequently cited as a benchmark for effective, humane, and future-ready education.

This paper examines the origins, philosophy, pedagogy, structure, strengths and challenges of both systems, and explores what each might learn from the other in designing educational models for the 21st century.

2. Background and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Gurukul Education under IKS: Historical Roots and Philosophy

- The traditional gurukul (guru + kula = teacher + family/household) system is among the oldest forms of formalised learning in India, tracing back to Vedic times.
- Under gurukul, students (śiṣyas) lived with their teacher (guru), forming a familial, residential setup — enabling continuous learning, mentoring, and close teacher-student relationship.

- The curriculum was broad and flexible — covering not just religious or philosophical texts (such as Vedas, Upanishads) but also sciences (e.g. mathematics, astronomy), arts (music, dance), medicine (Ayurveda), ethics, life skills, crafts, and more.
- Pedagogically, learning was holistic: combining mind, body, and spirit — integrating intellectual, moral, spiritual, physical, and practical dimensions.
- The system emphasized experiential learning, mentorship, dialogue, memorization and recitation (oral tradition), close interaction, moral and character-building, practical skills, and environmental/ecological wisdom.

Recent scholarship recognizes IKS not as a relic but a living tradition — highlighting its potential to provide context-aware, culturally rooted, interdisciplinary, and sustainable pedagogies.

2.2 The Finnish Education System: Philosophy, Structure, and Pedagogy

- The Finnish system is built on the principle of universal, equitable, and publicly funded education, ensuring all children—regardless of socio-economic background—have access to quality schooling.
- Education from pre-primary through basic compulsory schooling to upper secondary is free; resources provided often include school meals, materials, transportation, and support services.
- Teacher education is rigorous and highly selective — all teachers are required to have a master's degree; teaching is a respected and competitive profession in Finland.
- Teachers enjoy considerable autonomy: they can design curriculum delivery, choose teaching methods, and adapt to students' needs rather than follow rigid centralized protocols.
- The assessment culture emphasizes formative, continuous feedback over frequent standardized testing. There is minimal standardized testing: usually the only major exam occurs at the end of upper-secondary school (matriculation exam).
- Class sizes are small; learning is individualized; there is strong support for students with diverse needs; there is emphasis on play, arts, creativity, life skills, and well-being alongside academics.
- The curriculum is flexible and integrates transversal competencies — critical thinking, digital literacy, sustainability, cultural awareness, social-emotional skills — preparing students for complex, globalised world.

3. Review of Literature

Review of the literature highlights the Gurukul system's focus on holistic, value-based development and the Finnish system's emphasis on equity, highly trained teachers, and a low-stress, student-centric approach. Both models prioritize personalized learning and practical skills, though in vastly different cultural and historical contexts.

Literature reviews often compare Finland's success (PISA scores, efficiency) to other systems, highlighting its unique approach. Research on Gurukul often focuses on its historical relevance, modern applications (like in new education policies), and its holistic principles as an alternative to metrics-driven modern schooling.

The Gurukul system has influenced modern Indian education in several ways. It emphasizes learning in natural environments, holistic development, and the importance of extracurricular activities such as sports, yoga, and the arts, which are now recognized as an integral part of a well-rounded education (Frederick, 2016; A. Joshi & Gupta, 2017).

A number of results study has carried out by researchers previous as done by Selvamani (2019) that ancient Gurukul Indian period has unique characteristics and qualities that are not found in system education ancient . Although its nature old and primitive , that is System Gurukul education in India is unique character with The method Alone .

Garg and Singhal (2021) state that the Gurukul education system, despite its modern challenges, remains relevant in today's fast-paced world. It emphasizes personalized learning, moral development, and holistic growth, addressing issues such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of personalized attention, and increasing stress. The Gurukul system focused on one-on-one mentoring, allowing students to learn at their own pace, reducing stress and fostering deeper understanding.

One of the most important reforms of the Finnish education system was the establishment of comprehensive schools in the 1970s. Reform was adopted by the parliament in the early 1960s after which it was systematically planned and implemented by subsequent governments. The implementation of reform began in Northern Finland and was extended gradually to all Finnish schools during the 1970s. Its main objective was to provide a good basic education to all citizens irrespective of their socioeconomic background, gender, or geographical location (Ahonen, 2012; Nurmi, 1995; Välimaa, 2019). The policy aim followed the principles of the radical conception of equal educational opportunities, as defined by Husen (1975), according to which educational policy was an important factor in developing an equal society. The aim of reform was to support each pupil in his or her learning and provide every citizen with equitable access to high-quality education in every school across the country (Ahonen, 2012; Välimaa, 2019).

Comprehensive school reform served a dual function in the process of creating a fair and equal society in Finland. Firstly, equal educational opportunities for all citizens were defined as the primary educational goal. Secondly, education itself was understood to be one of the main instruments necessary for the creation of an equal society. These two interlinked processes indicated a high degree of trust in the benefits of education for Finnish society, the nation, and Finnish citizens.

4. Research Objectives:

- To analyze core values and principles of Gurukul education under the aegis of Indian Knowledge System.
- To compare Gurukul education with contemporary Finnish educational model.
- To explore benefits of integrating Gurukul principles and Finnish education system in the light of NEP,2020.

5. Research Methodology

Exploratory Research was conducted to clearly define the subject and helped to determine the best research design. The exploratory research relies on secondary research such as reviewing available literature and/or data, or qualitative approaches and more formal approaches through in-depth study and projective methods.

Descriptive Research has also been used to describe the characteristics of various aspects, such as the Education System of Finland and Gurukul system of education of India and it intends to comprehensively study their present pedagogy, overall methodology, and outcome.

Data Collection - Secondary data has been collected from various journals, articles, websites, etc. which have been used to study the evaluation, conceptual framework, comparison, definition, present trends, and future prospects of the Indian Education System and the Finnish Education System.

6. Comparative Analysis of Gurukul/IKS based Education and Finnish Education

Dimension	Gurukul / IKS-based Education	Finnish Education System
Philosophical / Purpose	Holistic development — mind, body, spirit; moral, ethical, spiritual growth; self-realization; interconnectedness with environment and community.	Holistic human development; equity; child's well-being; preparing learners for life, not just exams; democratic citizenship; lifelong learning.
Teacher–Student Relationship	Guru–śiṣya parampara: close, often residential; personalized mentor, moral guide, parent-like figure; learning beyond academics.	Professional, well-trained teachers with high autonomy and respect; small classes allow individual attention; teachers design curriculum and pedagogical methods.
Curriculum & Content	Wide-ranging: scriptures/philosophy, arts, sciences (astronomy, mathematics), medicine, ethics, life-skills, crafts — integrated across disciplines.	National core curriculum + local flexibility; integrates academics with arts, crafts, life skills, digital literacy; transversal competences (critical thinking, sustainability, well-being).
Pedagogical Method	Residential, experiential, oral textual learning, memorization & recitation, practical tasks, daily chores, moral instruction, discussion/dialogue, contextual learning in natural environment.	Student-centred, play-based (especially early years), inquiry-based, project/phenomenon-based learning, minimal homework and standardized tests, formative assessment, flexibility in methods.
Equity Access	Traditionally gurukuls claimed to be & open to “all,” not strictly limited by caste/wealth, though historical social structures complicated this.	Universal public schooling; no/very limited private school dominance; free education for all; inclusive support systems; no early tracking or segregation.
Assessment & Pressure	Less formal, less exam-centric; emphasis on mastery, recitation, moral/character formation, not grades/rankings.	Minimal standardized testing until upper-secondary; assessment through teacher feedback, projects, continuous observation; low stress, promotes well-being.
Strengths	Holistic growth, deeply integrated worldview, moral/ethical grounding, life-skills, close mentorship, environmental and sustainability consciousness, value-based education.	Equity and inclusivity; high-quality teacher workforce; flexibility; student well-being; creativity, critical thinking, lifelong learning; minimal stress and societal changes.
Challenges Limitations	Historically: lack of standardization, accreditation, scalability, modern relevance, integration with contemporary academic/career	Some argue that minimally-structured, less rigorous early years may not sufficiently challenge high-performing students; also requires high investment in teacher training, social welfare, and

Dimension	Gurukul / IKS-based Education	Finnish Education System
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demands; limited records, many continuous support which might be knowledge traditions lost or under-challenging for large, diverse, resource-documented.	constrained countries.
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7. Findings and Discussion: Complementarities and Potential Integrations

- **Holistic + Modern:** The holistic, value-based, interdisciplinary tradition of IKS/gurukul could fill a gap often missing in modern schooling — especially moral/ethical formation, environmental awareness, life skills, arts and crafts, and connection to cultural identity.
- **Equity + Scalability:** The Finnish model demonstrates how free, publicly funded education with equitable access, teacher autonomy, and support services can provide high-quality learning to all children — mitigating socio-economic disparities.
- **Teacher Empowerment and Respect:** The high status and autonomy of teachers in Finland ensures that educators are trusted professionals — a feature that could align well with the guru-śiṣya ideal of mentorship and moral guidance, if adapted thoughtfully.
- **Student-Centred, Less Stressful Learning:** The low-exam, student-friendly, play-based, well-being-oriented Finnish approach could combine well with the experiential, contextual, and life-skills orientation of gurukul/IKS to produce learners who are both rooted and globally competent.
- **Challenges for Integration:** However, there are structural and contextual challenges. The gurukul model — often residential, community-based, and small scale — may not be easily scalable for a large population such as India's. Conversely, implementing a Finnish-style welfare-backed system requires substantial public investment, robust teacher training infrastructure, and systemic social welfare support — which may strain resource-constrained contexts.
- **Accreditation, Relevance, Modern Skills:** One issue with purely traditional IKS education is the challenge of formal accreditation and recognition in contemporary academic/career contexts. For meaningful integration, curricula would likely need to be hybrid — blending traditional knowledge (philosophy, arts, ethics, life skills) with modern subjects (science, mathematics, digital literacy) and skills demanded by the 21st-century economy.

8 . Suggestions for Educational Policy and Reforms in India

Given recent policy interest in India in integrating IKS (through governmental frameworks), there is potential to envision a hybrid education model that draws on strengths of both gurukul-based IKS and modern, equity-oriented, learner-centred systems like Finland's. Key suggestions:

- Introduce IKS-inspired modules (ethics, environment, arts, crafts, life-skills) into mainstream school curricula, without compromising modern academic subjects.
- Train teachers not just in subject matter, but also in mentorship, holistic education, and cultural context — raising respect for teacher role, akin to guru-śiṣya.
- Promote small class sizes, formative assessment, personalized learning pathways, and reduce overemphasis on high-stakes examinations.
- Provide equitable access: ensure public funding, reduce dependence on private schools, ensure inclusive support for disadvantaged students.

- Encourage experiential, project-based, interdisciplinary learning that connects students to their environment, culture, and community.

Strategies for Indian teachers to adopt elements of the Finnish educational system in their classrooms.

- Finland's education system is considered one of the best in the world, consistently ranking high in international comparisons. Its unique approach to education, which emphasizes creativity, autonomy, and equality, has garnered attention from educators and policy makers around the world, including India. While there are challenges to implementing the Finnish model in India, there are also many compelling reasons to do so, and lessons that India can learn from Finland's success.
- One of the key elements of Finland's education system is a strong focus on equity. All Finnish children have access to high-quality education, regardless of their family background or socioeconomic status. This is achieved through a combination of policies and practices, including equal funding for all schools, a well-trained and highly-respected teaching workforce, and a strong emphasis on student-centered learning. In India, where there is significant inequality in access to quality education, particularly in rural areas, the Finnish model offers an opportunity to address this issue and ensure that all children have a fair chance to succeed.
- Another important aspect of Finland's education system is its approach to teacher training and development. In Finland, teaching is considered a highly respected and sought-after profession, and teachers receive extensive training, ongoing professional development, and support throughout their careers. This investment in teachers has helped to create a highly qualified and motivated teaching workforce, which has had a positive impact on student outcomes. In India, where teacher quality is often low and training opportunities are limited, the Finnish model provides a blueprint for improving teacher preparation and support.
- The Finnish approach to education is also characterized by a strong focus on student-centered learning. Teachers in Finland are trained to help students develop their own understanding of the world, rather than simply transmitting information. This approach encourages students to be active, creative, and autonomous learners, and has been shown to have a positive impact on student engagement, motivation, and achievement. In India, where rote learning and exam-focused teaching are common, the Finnish model offers an opportunity to shift the focus to student-centered learning, which has the potential to improve student engagement and outcomes.

Implementing the Finnish education model in an Indian classroom requires a shift in teaching philosophy and a focus on student-centered learning. Here are a few strategies that a teacher in India can use to incorporate elements of the Finnish curriculum into their own practice:

1. Promote student autonomy: In Finland, students are encouraged to take control of their own learning and explore topics that interest them. Teachers in India can implement this approach by giving students choices in what they learn, allowing them to take the lead in class discussions and activities, and encouraging them to ask questions and seek answers on their own.
2. Foster critical thinking skills: The Finnish curriculum emphasizes the development of critical thinking skills, which are crucial for success in the 21st century. Teachers in India can foster these skills by asking open-ended questions, encouraging students to explore multiple perspectives, and providing opportunities for students to engage in problem-solving and decision-making activities.
3. Encourage creativity: The Finnish education model places a strong emphasis on creativity, which is essential for innovation and success in the modern world. Teachers in India can encourage creativity by providing opportunities for students to explore new ideas and express themselves through art, music, and other forms of self-expression.

4. Focus on student well-being: The Finnish curriculum prioritizes student well-being, and recognizes the importance of emotional and physical health for academic success. Teachers in India can adopt this approach by promoting a positive classroom environment, encouraging students to take breaks and engage in physical activity, and addressing student stress and anxiety through counseling and support.
5. Invest in teacher training: In Finland, teachers receive extensive training and ongoing professional development to ensure that they are equipped to support student success. Teachers in India can benefit from similar training opportunities, which can help them to develop their skills and improve their teaching practice.
6. Foster collaboration: The Finnish curriculum promotes collaboration and teamwork, which are essential skills for success in the modern world. Teachers in India can encourage collaboration by organizing group activities, providing opportunities for students to work together on projects, and encouraging students to share their ideas and perspectives with one another.

In conclusion, by investing in teacher training and development, promoting student-centered learning, and focusing on equity, India has the potential to improve student outcomes and reduce inequality, while also developing a more creative and innovative approach to education. Further by adopting these strategies and incorporating elements of the Finnish curriculum into their own practice, teachers in India can help to improve student outcomes and create a more engaging and effective learning environment.

6. Conclusion

Both the gurukul-based IKS tradition and the Finnish education system present powerful, though different, visions of what education could be: not merely as preparation for employment, but as holistic development of human potential — intellectually, morally, socially, and emotionally.

While the gurukul system offers deep cultural roots, value-based and experiential learning, the Finnish system illustrates how these ideals can be scaled up in a modern, welfare-based, equitable public education system.

For educational reform — especially in multicultural, populous countries like India — a thoughtful synthesis of both could provide a model of education that is simultaneously grounded, humane, inclusive, future-oriented, and globally relevant.

Future research could explore pilot implementations of hybrid models, longitudinal tracking of student outcomes (academic, social, ethical), and comparative studies across regions and socio-economic backgrounds.

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