



BEYOND BOOKS: GIJUBHAI BADHEKA'S PHILOSOPHY OF HOLISTIC EDUCATION

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

A pioneering Indian educator, Gijubhai Badheka (1885–1939), questioned the inflexible colonial-era educational system with her progressive views on child-centred learning. Play and mother-tongue teaching are the foundations of Badheka's Bal-Mimamsa pedagogy, which complements NEP's emphasis on multilingualism, foundational literacy, and flexible curricula. His Divaswapna model, which emphasises dialogue and activities to foster learning, reflects the NEP's emphasis on engaging, multidisciplinary classrooms. Furthermore, his view of educators as facilitators rather than leaders supports NEP's demand for capable, compassionate teachers. This study looks at how Badheka's ideas can be applied practically within the framework of NEP, offering approaches such as reduced reliance on textbooks, activity-based pedagogy, and instruction in vernacular media. India can create an education system that is more inclusive and transformative by combining Badheka's timeless insights with the contemporary reforms of NEP. Finding in this study, Badheka's model of happy, child-centred learning provides insightful guidance for educational reform in India and elsewhere, especially in creating more equitable, humane, and successful teaching strategies for the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Gijubhai Badheka, holistic education, child-centered learning, Montessori in India, experiential education*

1. Introduction

Colonial India's educational system was predominantly authoritarian, characterised by strict discipline, rote learning, and a focus on examinations (Kumar, 2005). In this restrictive system, Gijubhai Badheka (1885–1939) emerged as a pioneering educationist advocating for a child-centred, experiential, and holistic approach to learning. Drawing from the insights of global educators like Maria Montessori and Rabindranath Tagore, alongside India's storytelling and folk traditions, Gijubhai reconceptualised education as an enjoyable and organic process, in contrast to a rigid imposition (Badheka, 1932/2010; Shukla, 2019). Gijubhai's philosophy challenged the prevailing colonial education model, which emphasised textbook-centered teaching and the passive reception of knowledge (Nambissan, 2010). He emphasised learning through play, storytelling, and real-world engagement, representing a significant departure from the conventional educational practices of his era. His influential work, *Divasvapna* (1932), critiques traditional education while advocating for learner autonomy, creativity, and emotional well-being (Badheka, 1932). The aim of education in ancient India was not just the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for life in this world, or life beyond schooling, but for the complete realization and liberation of the self (NEP, 2020). Current educational research increasingly endorses Gijubhai's vision, especially in domains such as constructivist learning (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1978), social-emotional development (CASEL, 2020), and experiential pedagogy (Dewey, 1938). His concepts correspond with contemporary criticism of standardised assessments and advocacy for more inclusive, adaptable educational settings (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). This paper analyses Gijubhai Badheka's educational philosophy, its theoretical underpinnings, and its lasting significance in contemporary pedagogy. This study examines his seminal works and their impact on Indian education, emphasising how his principles can guide contemporary reforms towards more holistic, child-centered schooling.

2. Gijubhai's Educational Philosophy: A Child-Centered Vision Rooted in Indian Soil

Gijubhai Badheka's educational philosophy emerged as a transformative alternative to the inflexible, examination-centric colonial education system of early 20th-century India. His holistic worldview redefined childhood, learning, and the essence of education, focusing on the child's inherent abilities and the belief that education should progress organically as development itself. Badheka proposed a radical view of childhood as a sacred realm of wonder and exploration, rejecting the segmentation of learning into distinct subjects. He integrated storytelling with mathematics, nature study with language acquisition, and crafts with ethical instruction, expecting modern ideas about how the brain develops through different sensory experiences. His culturally rooted conviction that education should emerge from local traditions while interacting with global concepts led to an impressive synthesis of Montessori's techniques by incorporating Indian resources and narrative traditions.

Gijubhai's daily routine showed how his ideas worked in real life. Mornings started with storytelling circles, learning happened through carefully planned "work" activities using native materials, discipline was fostered by community-made rules, and assessment looked at the child's overall growth instead of just testing bits of knowledge. Gijubhai's emphasis on democratic classrooms represented a significant departure from traditional educational practices in colonial India. He transformed the traditional guru-shishya hierarchy into a community where children could learn collaboratively and have their voices heard. Instead of being strict, teachers became guides who helped kids follow their instincts instead of forcing them to do things. The main idea behind Gijubhai's philosophy was to bring back the joy and meaning of learning. His vision gives timeless ideas for building schools that respect children's humanity and get them ready to change the world, inspiring teachers worldwide.

2.1. Child-Centered Learning

Gijubhai Badheka's most important contribution to education was his strong belief in child-centred learning. This approach was a big change from the strict, teacher-led classrooms of early 20th-century India. Gijubhai disagreed with the colonial model of education, which stressed strict discipline and rote memorisation (Kumar, 2005). Instead, he said that real learning happens when kids are actively involved in their education instead of just passively receiving information (Badheka, 1932/2010). His ideas are very similar to constructivist theories of learning, especially those of Piaget (1950) and Vygotsky (1978), which say that we learn by doing things, talking to people, and exploring. Gijubhai asserted that children learn best in an environment where they can:

- **Follow their natural curiosity** – Instead of forcing a fixed curriculum, he encouraged learning through questions, exploration, and hands-on activities.
- **Learn at their own pace** – He opposed rigid timetables and standardized expectations, recognizing that each child develops differently (Shukla, 2019).
- **Engage in self-directed activities** – Much like Montessori's (1912) approach, he believed children thrive when given the freedom to choose their learning tasks within a structured environment.

The concepts of Gijubhai were revolutionary in a system that valued conformity over critical thought. Divasvapna (1932), his fictional but very insightful book, shows how a teacher can create a classroom where kids think critically, ask questions, and take charge of their own learning by not using traditional methods (Badheka, 1932/2010). His method is still supported by modern educational research. Research on student-centred learning (Hattie, 2009) and inquiry-based education (Bruner, 1961) backs up the idea that being interested and controlling your own learning helps you understand and remember things better. Gijubhai's ideas are still very important today, when standardised tests often get in the way of creativity. They remind us that education should start with the child, not the book.

2.2. The Role of Play and Storytelling in Gijubhai Badheka's Pedagogy: Cultivating Joyful Learning

Gijubhai Badheka developed a pedagogical model that was radical for India in the early 20th century by putting play and storytelling at the centre of the educational process. His philosophy challenged the dominant colonial educational system, which viewed these pursuits as pointless diversions from "serious" academic work. Modern child development research now strongly supports Gijubhai's recognition of play and storytelling as potent vehicles for cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2005). Khel Shiksha, or play pedagogy, was Gijubhai's idea that turned conventional Indian classrooms into dynamic places where children could freely explore and learn through play. While preserving the inherent spontaneity and delight of childhood, he created developmentally appropriate play activities that were meticulously structured. Storytelling as Cultural and Cognitive Nourishment: Drawing on India's illustrious oral traditions, Gijubhai's Katha-Shikshan (narrative pedagogy) brought about a revolutionary shift in language education. In his classrooms, he introduced:

- **Purposeful Play Materials:** Gijubhai transformed traditional Indian games and toys into teaching aids. Hopscotch (stapu) strengthened math skills, clay modelling taught geometry, and spinning tops (lattu) became physics lessons (Badheka, 1932/2010). This method foresaw recent studies demonstrating how manipulative play develops fundamental STEM ideas. (Ramani et al., 2020).
- **Dramatic Play as Social Learning:** Children acted out scenarios from homes, bazaars, and communities. They naturally acquired empathy, cultural awareness, and conflict resolution techniques through these exercises, which mirrored what Vygotsky (1978) would later refer to as the social construction of knowledge.
- **Outdoor Play for Holistic Development:** Gijubhai insisted on having enough time for traditional Indian games, climbing, and running. He had an innate understanding of what modern neuroscience has shown: exercise improves emotional control and cognitive function (Ratey, 2008).
- **Folktales as Living Lessons:** Gijubhai taught morals through stories from the Panchatantra, Jataka tales, and local folklore rather than dry lectures. This approach was in line with what Bruner (1996) would later refer to as narrative modes of thinking, in which stories, not impersonal rules, are used to convey meaning.
- **Participatory Storytelling:** Instead of passively listening, children made up their stories, acted out characters, and came up with alternate endings. This approach, which foreshadowed contemporary strategies like the "story workshop" technique, promoted linguistic fluency and creative thinking (Healy, 2014).

2.3. Freedom with Responsibility: Gijubhai's Balanced Approach to Child Autonomy

Gijubhai Badheka's educational philosophy offered a nuanced understanding of freedom that goes beyond the dichotomy of authoritarian discipline and unrestrained permissiveness. His concept of "svatantra shikshan" (self-directed education) represents a culturally informed approach that balances individual autonomy with social responsibility, contributing uniquely to the discourse on democratic education theory (Shukla, 2019). This approach was grounded in a comprehensive understanding of Indian cultural values while also engaging with contemporary global progressive education movements. Gijubhai's philosophy centred on the principle of "sahaj svatantrata" (natural freedom), a concept that prefigured contemporary self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The author contended that children acquire responsibility not via external enforcement but through the natural consequences of their decisions in thoughtfully designed environments (Badheka, 2010/1932). The classrooms were systematically organised to provide what he termed "maryada purvak svatantrata" (freedom within boundaries), allowing children to choose activities from teacher-selected options that corresponded with developmental objectives. This structured autonomy approach is supported by contemporary educational research, which shows that limited choice enhances intrinsic motivation and self-regulation (Patall et al., 2008). The application of this philosophy by Gijubhai demonstrated extraordinary psychological insight. He instituted daily "svatantra karya samay" (independent work periods), during which the kids used visual organisers to plan their activities, self-monitoring charts to track their progress, and peer sharing circles to reflect on their results. What Zimmerman (2002) would later identify as essential elements of self-regulated learning was foreshadowed by these practices by decades. Dweck's (2006) growth mindset theory was also hinted at by Gijubhai's emphasis on accepting "sahaj galtiyan" (natural mistakes) as fundamental to the learning process.

2.4. Holistic Development: Gijubhai's Integrated Approach to Education

Gijubhai Badheka's educational philosophy grew like a banyan tree, with deep Indian roots and broad child development principles. He proposed "sampoorana shikshan" (complete education) as a radical alternative to colonial schooling, fostering mind, body, heart, and spirit harmony. At a time when education meant rigid benches and harsher discipline, Gijubhai's classrooms were full of active children. He transformed the guru-shishya relationship into a collaborative learning community where maths was taught by measuring rice in local markets, language by dramatising folk tales and science by tending school gardens. This experiential method predated constructivist theories by decades. According to Shukla (2019), "Gijubhai intuitively understood what neuroscience now confirms – that children learn best when their hands, hearts, and minds are all engaged simultaneously" (p. 145). He balanced morning storytelling circles to spark imagination, midday collaborative projects to build social skills, afternoon nature walks to foster observation, and evening reflection time to develop metacognition. The spaces Gijubhai designed taught. Classrooms flowed into courtyards with clay modelling stations for fine motor skills; woodworking corners for measurement and geometry; kitchen gardens as living laboratories; and storytelling nooks with regional artefacts for cultural connection. While rooted in Indian culture, this child-centred philosophy anticipated modern positive youth development frameworks (Lerner et al., 2005). His careful observation, narrative documentation, and portfolio collections reflected his developmental depth goals. Compare Gijubhai's holistic vision with today's hyper-competitive academic culture to understand its lasting power. Krishna Kumar (2020) states, "Gijubhai's greatest gift was showing us that the most sophisticated pedagogy grows from simple truths – that children learn best when their whole being is engaged, when their culture is respected, and when their natural joy remains intact" (p. 112). This timeless wisdom illuminates more meaningful, humane, and effective education.

3. Gijubhai and Montessori: The Art of Cultural Adaptation in Education

Gijubhai Badheka's creative adaptation of Maria Montessori's methods brought global and local pedagogical ideas to early 20th-century India. Gijubhai's genius was trying to "decolonise" Montessori's child-centered approach and plant it in India (Shukla, 2019; p. 142). Indigenisation was one of the first and most successful examples of glocalisation in education, where universal pedagogical principles were adapted to local cultures. Montessori's methodology changed Indian education when Gijubhai visited her training centre in 1920. According to educational historian Sureshchandra Shukla (2019), "Badheka was no mere imitator; he became a creative innovator who transformed Montessori's scientific pedagogy into a culturally resonant Indian tradition" (p. 145). Rather than simply translating materials into Gujarati, he reimagined Montessori through an Indian civilisational lens. Under Gijubhai's direction, Montessori's sensory materials changed drastically. Gijubhai's 1920 Dakshinamurti Vinay Mandir used wooden spinning tops (lattu), clay diyas, and handwoven textiles, unlike Italian classrooms that used porcelain buttons and Victorian dolls. The outcome was not just substitution but a profound cultural recontextualisation that made abstract concepts concrete through children's everyday objects. Gijubhai demonstrated his adaptability in language instruction. Gijubhai created Gujarati learning tools that respected Indian scripts, while Montessori used Roman alphabet phonetics for Italian. His innovative "Akshar Mala" (alphabet garland) taught letter recognition using folk art motifs, combining linguistic pedagogy with cultural preservation (Patel, 2017). By decades, this approach foresaw "culturally sustaining pedagogy" (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Perhaps Gijubhai's most significant departure from Montessori was values education. Montessori used a secular, scientific approach; Gijubhai boldly integrated India's rich ethical storytelling tradition. Gijubhai adapted Panchatantra, Jataka, and regional folklore to teach morality in his "Katha-Shikshan" (narrative pedagogy) classes. According to researcher Meena Gupta (2020), "This wasn't religious instruction but civilisational education – helping children navigate life's complexities through India's timeless wisdom traditions" (p. 89). In Gijubhai's adaptation, the role of the teacher also evolved. While Montessori saw

the teacher as a detached scientific observer, Gijubhai's guru-shishya model maintained Indian affectionate guidance. His teachers were "participant observers" who joined children's activities and gently guided learning, similar to scaffolding in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This cultural fusion created an Indian progressive education that valued individual autonomy and community connection.

Comparative education research today helps us appreciate Gijubhai's achievement. Educational borrowing has four stages: cross-national attraction, decision-making, implementation, and internalisation, according to Phillips and Ochs (2004). Gijubhai's work may be India's best example of internalisation, where imported ideas become "naturalised" through cultural adaptation. As Tschurenev (2019) notes, most colonial education borrowing was superficial, but "Badheka's synthesis achieved what few colonial educators could – an authentic indigenisation of progressive methods" (p. 217). Indian education is influenced by this adaptation. The NCERT's Learning Without Burden programme and the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on indigenous pedagogies are largely inspired by Gijubhai. His legacy continues as India navigates global educational exchange while preserving its civilised identity, proving that the best educational innovations honour universal child development principles and specific cultural contexts.

4. Relevance in Contemporary Education: Gijubhai's Living Legacy

Gijubhai Badheka's educational philosophy, developed in colonial India, still encourages transformative learning in the 21st century. His visionary approach, aligned with UNESCO's Futures of Education report (2021), provides helpful guidance regarding today's educational challenges. The National Education Policy 2020 (MHRD, 2020) echoes Gijubhai's Bal Bodh techniques, which make abstract concepts concrete through manipulative materials. Contemporary research in social-emotional learning supports Gijubhai's holistic methods, such as cooperative games and community circles, which foster self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Neuroscience confirms his intuitive understanding that emotional security enables cognitive growth, explaining why his joyful classrooms achieved remarkable learning outcomes. Gijubhai's Khel Shiksha (play pedagogy) approach anticipates current understanding of play as a vehicle for developing executive function skills. The American Academy of Pediatrics' prescription of play for healthy child development validates his century-old insistence on its educational value. In addressing digital age challenges, Gijubhai's emphasis on sensory experiences and direct nature contact offers a balance to screen-dominated childhoods. Current research on nature deficit disorder and the cognitive benefits of green spaces supports his ecological approach to learning. His storytelling methods suggest alternatives to passive digital consumption. NCERT's Nishtha program (NCERT, 2021) incorporated Gijubhai-inspired pedagogy, demonstrating significant gains in foundational learning. Case studies of schools applying his principles show improved student engagement and teacher satisfaction. The ASER 2022 report underscores the urgency of adopting activity-based approaches to address India's learning crisis. However, challenges remain in scaling Gijubhai's vision, such as the tension between standardized assessment and holistic development, the need for teacher professional development, and infrastructure constraints. Gijubhai's iterative approach to reform suggests the value of localized adaptation rather than mechanical replication.

5. Conclusion

India's civilised wisdom informs Gijubhai Badheka's child-centered, culturally rooted, and joyful learning philosophy. His groundbreaking holistic approach to cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical development was rooted in India's civilisational wisdom. His emphasis on experiential learning, storytelling, and play influenced constructivism, social-emotional learning, culturally responsive teaching, and mindfulness in education. NEP 2020 emphasises foundational literacy, critical thinking, and holistic development, echoing Gijubhai's vision. His philosophy that education should be joyful and liberating rather than mechanical is his greatest contribution. He showed that learning thrives in cultural contexts, respects children's autonomy, and occurs in democratic communities rather than hierarchies. Gijubhai's wisdom guides 21st-century education through anxiety and fragmentation. His legacy inspires us to renew classrooms as places of wonder, creativity, and humanity.

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