



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FROM TAGORE'S "THE MOTHER'S PRAYER" AND NEP 2020

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper proposes a blueprint for women's empowerment through the convergence of the ethical vision in Rabindranath Tagore's dramatic poem, 'The Mother's Prayer,' and India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. For too long, conventional narratives on women's empowerment have emphasized socio-economic measures while overlooking the fundamental role of inner, moral strength. It also suggests that empowerment extends beyond material values and calls for empathy for the oppressed, ultimately leading to the moral courage to do justice (Dharma). Following a critical reading of Tagore's work, we explore Queen Gandhari's assertion of her desire to disown her unrighteous son, not as an act of power-assertion, but as a powerful commitment to ethics. This Tagorean ideal is now contrasted with the NEP 2020's core principles of a holistic, multidisciplinary, and value-based education. The policy's focus on critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and concrete measures, such as the Gender-Inclusion Fund, offers a contemporary pedagogical trajectory for cultivating the virtues Tagore valorises. The paper posits that the coming together of Tagore's philosophy and the NEP 2020's structure provides a powerful, yet culturally rooted, alternative model for women's empowerment, which fully prepares women with not only 21st century competences, but also with the personal and ethical agency to reimagine what success and leadership looks like in a fair and equitable world.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Holistic Development, Rabindranath Tagore, NEP 2020, Ethical Education, Gender Equality.

Introduction

The women's empowerment dialogue has matured significantly over the decades, shifting from an earlier narrow focus on economic independence to a broader perspective encompassing social, political, and emotional agency. But a key aspect is often neglected: empowerment as an inner moral courage and ethical conviction. This paper attempts to articulate a framework towards such an understanding by drawing from two key Indian texts: Rabindranath Tagore's dramatic poem, "The Mother's Prayer" (Tagore, 1921/2017), and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Rabindranath Tagore was a visionary poet and social reformer who, throughout his writing, has stressed an education that would help in a complete human being and not a fanatic, someone who thinks narrowly, in the loom of narrowly selfish motives. The balanced development of intellect, emotion, and spirit characterized his educational theory. "The Mother's Prayer," a dramatic episode from the Mahabharata, serves as a powerful expression of this ethos. It captures an appeal made by Queen Gandhari, who requested to renounce her son Duryodhana as he had achieved victory through deceit and unrighteousness. It is a perception of power that only through conquest can its authority be established, and such shall it always remain, but here, her prayer is a resounding cry out, that the true strength is to have the courage to protect, above all, Dharma (righteousness).

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 comes a hundred years after as a game-changing reform in India to transform education to cater to 21st-century demands. One central drive of NEP 2020 is an emphasis on a "holistic and multidisciplinary education" that is aimed at moulding "character" and producing "ethical, rational, compassionate, and caring" individuals (Ministry of Education, 2020). This policy explicitly bemoans "hard separations" between academic streams, in favour of embracing vocational and life skills, and the development of critical thinking and creativity rather than rote memorization (Ministry of Education, 2020).

This article argues that a discussion on "The Mother's Prayer" by Tagore and the principles of NEP 2020 can offer a strong and culturally relevant framework in women's empowerment. This model maintains that true empowerment is not obtained by superficially following patriarchal patterns of domination like Duryodhana, but by developing an integrated self that is

intellectual and ethically profound. In exploring how NEP 2020's structure of education may foster the moral virtues, such as moral courage and uprightness, celebrated by Tagore, this paper seeks to work towards offering a way of empowering women that is transformative on the personal level and subsequently for the societal level.

Rationale

What makes this study distinctive is the innovative use of a classical ethical-cultural text with a real-world policy document to define women's empowerment. If policy can furnish the "how," cultural narratives often can provide the "why." In Tagore's "The Mother's Prayer," the contradiction between sublime spiritual attainment and material triumphs is a perennial one and a hallmark of the life of power and success. Gandhari's choice is a template for empowerment based not in a subversion of patriarchy for self-advancement but rather by keeping in mind the universal righteousness, even at enormous cost to oneself. This vision is so resonant now, offering an alternative to empowerment fantasies that glorify aggression and individualism.

NEP 2020, with its vision of creating an "education system rooted in Indian ethos" (Ministry of Education, 2020) and the development of an "ethical and human & Constitutional values," presents a promising vehicle to operationalize this vision. By linking the mechanics of the policy – e.g., multidisciplinary studies, value-based education, and gender-inclusive measures – to the ethically potent narrative in Tagore's work, this paper offers a deeper, more complicated view of what holistic development stands to do for women. It posits that for empowerment to be sustainable and purposeful; it needs to be firmly grounded in an ethical character that equips women to lead with wisdom and justice. This paper is a timely one as it adds voice and thoughts into the conversation that is centred on implementing NEP 2020, and suggests a deeper and culturally grounded purpose for its transformative goals.

Literature Review

The literature available on indicators of women's empowerment, education, and the philosophy of Tagore is extensive and varied. An underlying message is that education is the key to fostering gender equality. UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has always emphasized that education is a right and an indispensable means of social and economic advancement for women. But there are also reports that those disparities are enduring. (For instance, progress has been made toward gender parity in enrolment, but large inequalities persist, both in learning achievements and in the conversion of education into economic and political power.) Other analyses, such as the UNESCO Gender Report 2024, also discuss how the digital divide and the use of technology in education add new layers of challenges and opportunities for gender equality (UNESCO, 2024).

In the Indian context, the National Education Policy 2020 has sparked off numerous academic debates. Researchers have analysed its potential to contribute to women's higher education and employability, highlighting its focus on flexibility and skills development (Das, 2022). The Policy is progressive in its promulgation of a Gender-Inclusion Fund and providing sensitive equal opportunity for all SEDGs, including women (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The idea of a holistic education, as envisaged in NEP 2020, is not necessarily new. It harmonizes with worldwide demands for an education that nurtures the entire individual – intellectually, emotionally, socially, and ethically. Interestingly, a gender-inclusive approach asks for change, can't be piecemeal, it needs a paradigmatic shift that respects cultural norms, social structures, and individual consciousness at the same time. This view is echoed in the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen, which understands development not merely as economic development, but as the expansion of freedom and capability of people – the freedom for each person to be and to do things they value (Robeyns, 2003). Capability, including the capability of ethical judgment and social participation enhancement, could be propagated through education.

Rabindranath Tagore is known as an advocate of holistic education and a man who thought deeply on the "feminine dimension of human values" (Chakraborty, 2000). Many of his works address the intricate, inner lives of women and criticize the rigid social norms that they faced. In his novels such as *Home and the World* (Ghare-Baire), one will get a glimpse of Tagore's nuanced understanding of female agency, where women characters struggled to navigate between the home (ghare) and the world (baire), tradition and modernity (Khushi & Johri, 2025). Some scholars have characterised Tagore as a feminist advocating for women's liberation and education (Shila, 2015), while others argue that his was a more conservative view, valuing women as complementary figures, emphasising their strengths in nurturing and being "spiritual". What does not change is his conviction that education should "free" the mind and spirit from all forms of enslavement.

Research Gap

Plenty of literature is available on women's empowerment through the educational policy (UNESCO, 2024) and on the holistic objectives of NEP 2020 (Das, 2022) and the philosophical thinking of Tagore on women and education (Chakraborty, 2000). Though these are long-existing areas of research, a synthesis linking up the ethical framework of Tagore's "The Mother's Prayer" to the pedagogical mechanisms through the NEP 2020 continues to be an underexplored concept. This paper attempts to fill the gap by serving as a conceptual link between Tagore's literary description of moral courage and current educational policy in fleshing out a more culturally rich and rounded framework for empowerment.

Research Question

How does the ideal of righteous, inner strength articulated in Rabindranath Tagore's "The Mother's Prayer" converge with the holistic and ethical education framework of NEP 2020 to create a comprehensive model for contemporary women's empowerment?

Research Objective

To analyse the thematic parallels between Tagore's vision of holistic development in "The Mother's Prayer" and the educational framework of NEP 2020, and to propose an integrated model for fostering women's empowerment rooted in both ethical character and 21st-century skills.

Methodology

The methodological approach used in this study is qualitative content analysis. The research design is informed by the in-depth exploratory close reading and the interpretation of primary and secondary source materials in order to identify the underlying conceptual framework.

Source Selection

Purposive sampling was employed to select the main sources. We have 'The Mother's Prayer' (1921/2017) by Tagore chosen as a powerful literary depiction of moral empowerment, which is an embodiment of Tagorean conviction in internal morality-formation over external material pursuits. The National Education Policy (2020) was chosen as it is the recent and most elaborate official document that lays down the blueprint for Indian education with a specific directive for the pursuit of holistic and value-based education. Peer-reviewed articles, academic reports, and books by reputable authors also served the secondary sources to set the analysis within broader academic discussions of education, gender, and Tagore's philosophy.

Analysis Method

The analysis was conducted in 3 steps. Concerning the two main texts, a thematic analysis was carried out to extract the central ideas. In Tagore's poem, moral courage (Dharma) and resistance to unjust power were emphasized. For NEP 2020, the themes were holistic development, multidisciplinary, and gender inclusion. Second, a cross-referential synthesis was carried out, overlaying the stated ideals of "The Mother's Prayer" with the pedagogical and structural mechanisms envisaged in NEP 2020. This procedure served to find commonalities to construct a core argument. Finally, insights from the secondary literature were included to support and add depth to this synthesis, maintaining focus and scholarship.

Results And Discussion: A Model for Women's United Empowerment

We delineate the way to this deepening of our understanding of women's empowerment through the integration of the moral vision of "The Mother's Prayer" by Tagore, with the practical scheme of NEP 2020. This synthesis develops a framework in which empowerment is not restricted to gaining external power, but instead is about the development of an internal ethical agency that allows women to re-imagine and subsequently lead in ways that are grounded in their moral authority.

One of the central lessons of 'The Mother's Prayer' is the negation of that unhealthy rise of power. Queen Gandhari faces a son, Duryodhana, who is arrogant in a victory secured by deceit. He expresses an utterly materialistic, cynical view of the world: "Kshatriya thirsts not after happiness but victory, that fiery wine pressed from seething jealousy" (Tagore, 1921/2017). He dismisses justice as that of a dream for fools, believing only in "power, merciless and unhampered with scruples" (Tagore, 1921/2017). To Gandhari, that is her act of empowerment, refusing to accept this definition of success. Her prayer – "I ask you to renounce Duryodhana the unrighteous" is an audacious one, which asserts a claim to Dharma over filial relationship as well as for political gain (Tagore, 1921/2017). This Tagorean vision has its contemporary pedagogical analogue in the goal articulated by NEP 2020 to promote individuals who are not just competent, but also "ethical, rational, compassionate, and caring" (Ministry of Education, 2020). The obvious focus of the policy on the "character" and the possession of "sound ethical moorings" enables girls to construct an identity that is more invulnerable to the corrupting temptations of power for power's sake and would facilitate leadership guided by moral principles.

Gandhari's real strength is that she can look beyond the immediate, intoxicating prospect of a kingdom. In response to her husband, King Dhritarashtra, questioning what end would then be subserved were they to abjure their son, her answer is blunt: "God's blessing" (Tagore, 1921/2017). This shows a value structure where spiritual and moral proclamation is more important than material abundance. This Shakti is fostered through the holistic education approach enshrined in NEP 2020. It is, in effect, Tagore's encounter to posit a whole person, one whose moral capabilities match his or her intellectual ones. Individuals who can think and work across divisions such as these are to be generated as a result of the NEP 2020 framework that prescribes "holistic and multidisciplinary education" without the "hard separations" between arts and sciences and between curricular and co-curricular activities (Ministry of Education, 2020). For a woman, it means an education that doesn't require a choice between being, such as with two roads diverging in the woods, one labelled "scientist" or "artist," "professional" or "caregiver," but a road that can be many things together. This imbibed wisdom inspired by oaks is the wisdom that is necessary to reach a responsibility to make sophisticated ethical choices, similar to that Gandhari draws upon when she has to evaluate the balance between motherly love versus adherence to righteousness. A well-rounded education enables a woman to have a broader view, and in a way straying from the kind of destructive ambition that we see Duryodhana have.

In Tagore's poem, Gandhari's decision is based on pure knowledge of truth (Satya) and duty (Dharma). NEP 2020 wants to arm every child with the capability for this kind of judgment. The policy creates room for "critical thinking," "inquiry-based," and "analysis-based learning" by stripping down the curriculum content to "core essentials" (Ministry of Education, 2020). The shift from rote memorisation to critical thinking is really important in enabling women to challenge oppressive social constructs and to question unjust authority. By emphasizing teaching values, such as 'gender sensitivity, respect for all persons, empathy, tolerance, and human rights', the policy immediately gives young women the ethical language and framework to express their rights and question discrimination (Ministry of Education, 2020). Gandhari's last vision is one of a devastating, if purgative, purgation: "Darkness will shroud the sky, earth will tremble... and then comes the silent and cruel end, - that terrible peace... the supreme deliverance rising from the fire of death" (Tagore, 1921/2017). A moral education enables a woman to see such bitter truths and, if needed, accept them for the larger purpose of good.

This image of an ethically responsible woman empowered in this manner is supported through concrete, structural interventions in the new policy. While Tagore gives the concealing in the ideal, NEP 2020 provides a roadmap to achieve it on a national scale. The creation of the 'Gender-Inclusion Fund' is identified as a groundbreaking step that aims to "build the nation's capacity to provide equitable quality education for all girls as well as transgender students" (Ministry of Education, 2020). This fund, focused on breaking down practical obstacles to education, such as sanitation, toilets, and transport, will help to provide girls with the kind of transformative education the policy dreams of. It is a symbol of the state's resolve to provide an ambience in which the dignity of women and their development are not mere words but a palpable reality. By complementing the nurture of virtues with the elimination of impediments from outside, there is synergy between Tagore's idealism and the pragmatic spirit of NEP 2020 in devising a holistic and pragmatic action framework for women's empowerment. This model paves the way for women who are professional leaders as well as moral leaders who can help create a world that is more just.

Conclusion

The paper has contended that the convergence of Rabindranath Tagore's vision in "The Mother's Prayer" and the tenets of the National Education Policy 2020 fosters a unique model of empowerment for women. Tagore's vision provides a timeless model of empowerment rooted in moral courage – the fortitude to stand for right despite personal interest and worldly gain. Through its focus on holistic education, multi-disciplinary approach, and value-based approach, NEP 2020 offers a modern, actionable matrix for nurturing this very strength. Going beyond rote learning and promoting critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and empathy, as envisaged by NEP 2020, education, through its timeless function of character forming, can give rise to individuals, like Gandhari in Tagore's poem, with a rebellious heart. For women, this becomes a kind of empowerment that not only involves getting to parity in a male-dominated, power-hungry world, but also in terms of agency to transform that world. It gives them not only the tools to succeed but also the ideal of redefining success itself, measuring it by the standards of justice, equality, and human dignity. The model proposed here is theoretical. The efficacy of such a system rests upon the genuine and collective endeavour of our policymakers, educators, and society to adopt the underlying spirit of holistic development. Further research will need to concentrate on empirical studies in order to measure how curricula linked to ethical and human values can influence self-perception of female students, agency building, and life choices. Yet, in drawing the wisdom of our culture's ethos together with the ambition of our future policy, we can see the way towards a model of women's empowerment that is practical, effective, and deeply enriching and sustainable to India and the world.

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