



## Cultural Sustainability and the Role of Arts Education in Indian Higher Education: Policy Frameworks, Curriculum Integration, and Implementation Challenges

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### Abstract:

*Cultural sustainability has emerged as a critical dimension of sustainable development, complementing environmental, economic and social perspectives. In culturally diverse societies like India, higher education institutions play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and shaping the values and cultural consciousness of youth. Arts education contributes significantly to cultural sustainability by fostering creativity, critical thinking, cultural identity and intercultural understanding. Drawing on international perspectives, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Indian Knowledge Systems, and relevant literature, the study highlights gaps between policy intent and institutional practice. It identifies curricular rigidity, faculty preparedness and market-driven educational priorities as key challenges.*

*This article explores the role of arts education in promoting cultural sustainability in Indian higher education by analysing policy frameworks, curriculum integration strategies, and implementation challenges. It concludes by suggesting strategic measures to strengthen arts education for sustaining India's cultural heritage through higher education.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Sustainability, Arts Education, Indian Higher Education, NEP 2020, Indian Knowledge Systems.*

### Introduction:

Sustainability has traditionally been understood through environmental, economic, and social dimensions. However, in recent decades, scholars and international organizations have increasingly recognized culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016). Cultural sustainability refers to the capacity of societies to preserve, transmit and renew their cultural values, traditions, artistic expressions and knowledge systems while adapting to social and technological change. In multicultural societies like India, cultural sustainability is deeply linked to national identity, social unity and inclusive development.

India is home to a rich diversity of languages, art forms, crafts, music, dance traditions and indigenous knowledge systems. Higher education institutions play a vital role in conserving this cultural heritage while shaping the values and cultural consciousness of youth (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). Arts education supports cultural sustainability by fostering creativity, critical thinking, and engagement with cultural heritage.

However, increasing emphasis on employability and market-driven education has led to the marginalisation of arts education in Indian higher education (UNESCO, 2016).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift by explicitly emphasising holistic, multidisciplinary education and the integration of arts and Indian Knowledge Systems (Government of India, 2020). By integrating arts education into curricula, NEP 2020 supports sustainable development goals through nurturing creative, culturally rooted and socially responsible citizens. While the policy presents a progressive vision, its effective implementation within higher education institutions remains a challenge.

### **Conceptualising Cultural Sustainability and Arts Education: (Arts-Related Disciplines)**

Cultural sustainability involves maintaining cultural continuity while allowing creative transformation. Culture shapes people's identities, values, and worldviews, making it central to sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016). In education, cultural sustainability refers to teaching practices and curricula that preserve cultural heritage while encouraging innovation and critical engagement.

Arts education is basically connected to cultural sustainability because art is both a product and a carrier of culture. It emphasises that arts education nurtures imagination, aesthetic awareness and interpretive skills, enabling learners to understand and appreciate cultural meanings (Eisner, 2002). In the Indian context, arts education also plays a role in preserving intangible cultural heritage, such as folk traditions, classical performing arts, crafts and oral traditions.

Indian philosophical traditions have long emphasised the holistic development of individuals through the integration of knowledge, art and ethics. The ancient Gurukul system placed significant importance on music, dance, storytelling, and crafts as integral components of education (Sharma, 2015). Arts were not considered separate from intellectual pursuits but were seen as essential for moral and cultural development. In modern higher education, arts education supports cultural sustainability by preserving traditional and indigenous art forms, strengthening cultural identity and national integration, fostering respect for cultural diversity, and enabling creative reinterpretation of cultural heritage. Thus, arts education functions as both a preservative and transformative force within Indian higher education.

### **Policy Frameworks Supporting Arts Education in Indian Higher Education:**

- **International Policy Perspectives:** International policy frameworks emphasise the integration of culture and arts within education for sustainable development. UNESCO (2017) highlights arts education as a means of fostering creativity, cultural awareness and social cohesion. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, stress inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning and cultural diversity (United Nations, 2015).
- **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS):** The inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems is a distinctive feature of NEP 2020. IKS encompasses traditional knowledge in philosophy, arts, sciences, mathematics, medicine, architecture, and ecology (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). Arts education plays a crucial role in transmitting IKS by connecting students with traditional cultural practices and epistemologies.
- **National Education Policy 2020:** In India, the NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive policy framework for integrating arts education into higher education. The policy envisions of holistic and multidisciplinary education, integration of arts, humanities, and sciences, Promotion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and finally flexibility in curriculum design and evaluation systems. NEP 2020 explicitly rejects rigid disciplinary boundaries and advocates for a "creative combination of arts and sciences" (Government of India, 2020). The policy encourages universities to offer courses in Indian arts, culture and traditions to students across disciplines.

- **Role of Regulatory Bodies:** The University Grants Commission (UGC) has issued guidelines promoting value-based education, cultural studies and multidisciplinary programs. However, the implementation of these guidelines varies widely across institutions, often depending on leadership priorities and resource availability.
- **Sustainable Development Goals, Arts Education and NEP 2020:** The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise education as a key driver of sustainable development, particularly through SDG 4, which emphasises inclusive, equitable with quality education for lifelong learning (United Nations, 2015). Arts education contributes significantly to the achievement of the SDGs by fostering creativity, cultural awareness, critical thinking and social responsibility competencies essential for sustainable societies. It also supports SDG11 by promoting the preservation of cultural heritage and strengthening community identity through artistic practices. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aligns closely with the SDGs by advocating a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to education that integrates arts, culture, and Indian Knowledge Systems across all levels of education (Government of India, 2020).

### **Curriculum Integration of Arts Education in Indian Higher Education:**

Curriculum integration is the primary mechanism through which arts education can contribute to cultural sustainability. In Indian higher education, arts education is integrated through various approaches such as Arts-related disciplines include visual and performing arts, fine arts, music, dance, literature, design, media arts and traditional cultural practices. These fields foster creativity, cultural understanding and critical thinking while supporting the preservation of cultural heritage and holistic development in higher education (Eisner, 2002).

While these departments preserve artistic traditions, their impact is often limited to a small group of students. NEP 2020 encourages interdisciplinary learning, allowing arts courses to be offered as electives or minors to students from science, commerce and professional streams. This approach broadens exposure to arts and culture, promoting cultural literacy among a wider student population (Kumar, 2021).

Experiential learning, including workshops, performances, exhibitions and community engagement, is essential for meaningful arts education. Collaboration with artists and cultural institutions enhances students' understanding of living cultural traditions (Bamford, 2006).

Despite these possibilities, studies indicate that arts education in Indian higher education often remains peripheral, with limited credit weightage and assessment focus (Rao, 2019). Curriculum rigidity and examination-oriented systems further restrict innovative arts-based pedagogy.

### **Role of Arts Education in Promoting Cultural Sustainability among Indian University Students:**

Arts education contributes significantly to students' cultural awareness, identity formation and social responsibility with aesthetic knowledge. In a culturally diverse country like India, exposure to multiple art forms fosters intercultural understanding and respect. Generally, arts education enhances cultural sensitivity, empathy, critical reflection on tradition with modernity, appreciation of regional, aesthetic skills etc. Arts and humanities education is essential for democratic citizenship, as it encourages critical thinking and ethical reasoning (Nussbaum, 2010). In Indian higher education, arts education also plays a role in promoting national integration by exposing students to diverse cultural traditions across regions. Arts education empowers marginalised communities by recognising and validating their cultural expressions, including folk and tribal art forms in curricula in Higher education institutions for contributing to inclusive cultural sustainability (Devy, 2014).

### **Implementation Challenges in Indian Higher Education:**

- Despite strong policy support, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of arts education for cultural sustainability in Indian higher education.
- Many institutions prioritise professional and technical programs due to employability concerns and funding patterns. Arts education is often perceived as non-essential, leading to limited institutional support and infrastructure.
- Rigid curricula and credit structures limit interdisciplinary integration. Assessment systems focused on examinations and grades undervalue creative and experiential learning, discouraging meaningful engagement with arts education (NCERT, 2005).
- There is a shortage of trained faculty with interdisciplinary expertise in arts and cultural education. Limited opportunities for faculty development in arts-based pedagogy and orientation program.
- Students often view arts education as less relevant to career prospects, reflecting broader societal attitudes that prioritise economic outcomes over cultural development.
- Lack of proper planning to implement the policies as political disturbance up to some extension create a barrier towards the implementation.

### **Strategies for Strengthening Arts Education for Cultural Sustainability: (tentative)**

- Curriculum reforms promoting interdisciplinary arts education
- Faculty development programs in arts-based pedagogy
- Institutional partnerships with cultural organisations
- Integration of local and indigenous art forms
- Assessment systems valuing creativity and cultural engagement
- Try to work on social mis-concepts about the arts curriculum towards employment

### **Conclusion:**

Cultural sustainability is a vital yet often overlooked dimension of sustainable development, particularly in the context of higher education. In India, with its rich and diverse cultural heritage, higher education institutions bear a significant responsibility for sustaining cultural traditions and knowledge systems. Arts education serves as a powerful vehicle for cultural sustainability by fostering creativity, cultural awareness and critical engagement.

While policy frameworks such as NEP 2020 and other policies provide a strong foundation for integrating arts education into higher education, implementation challenges persist at institutional, curricular and pedagogical levels. Addressing these challenges requires a systemic and context-sensitive approach that aligns policy intentions with institutional practices. Strengthening arts education in Indian higher education can contribute not only to cultural sustainability but also to holistic human development and inclusive nation-building.

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