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Rote Learning to Heutagogical Autonomy: An Assessment of Learner-Centric Perspective of NEP 2020 through Rabindranath Tagore's "Tota-Kahini"

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to usher in a transformational change in Indian education by enabling a deliberate transition from a rigid, teacher-directed and rote learning system to a flexible, learner-centred and self-directed (heutagogical) educational paradigm. However, a persistent challenge in broad educational reform is the gap that frequently exists between innovative policy discourse and actual institutional practice. This article critically examines the learner-oriented directives of NEP 2020 in the light of Rabindranath Tagore's 1918 allegory of education, Tota-Kahini (The Parrot's Tale), as a pedagogical diagnostic tool. In Tota-Kahini Tagore hints at how the innate energy, curiosity and independence of the student is crushed out by elaborate institutional structures, bureaucracy and mechanical textuality. The current qualitative study juxtaposes the Tagorean anti-mechanistic educational philosophy with existing policy initiatives and seeks to explore whether post-NEP curricular reforms foster authentic student autonomy or inadvertently construct a modern-day, metric-driven 'gold cage'. Drawing on qualitative policy analysis, curriculum theory and philosophical inquiry, the research explores how key structural and pedagogical barriers, including over-reliance on standard digital delivery, inflexible credit systems and bureaucratic audit cultures, undermine the depth of heutagogical principles and turn them into superficial compliance. Furthermore, the manuscript argues that true heutagogical autonomy goes beyond basic administrative updates to include learner agency, innovative exploration, holistic well-being, and compassionate mentorship in curriculum design for instruction and teacher training. Finally, the research proposes a Tagorean-compatible evaluation framework that provides curriculum planners, education managers and policy implementers with practical diagnostic criteria to ensure that the learner-oriented vision of NEP 2020 indeed liberates student potential rather than simply reasserting it.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Heutagogy, Learner Autonomy, Gold Cage, Tota-Kahini

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1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 Conceptual Framework Development: From Pedagogy to Heutagogy

For many years, educational theory has been struggling with the limitations of conventional pedagogy, a framework that has traditionally relied on instructor-led teaching, standardised curricula, and uniform evaluations. The concept of self-directed learning began with the progressivism and adult learning theory (andragogy) movements in the early 20th century, but the educational needs of the 21st century demand a progression to heutagogy. The term heutagogy in relation to the study of self-directed learning was introduced by Stewart Hase and Chris Kenyon in 2000. Unlike traditional teaching methods where the teacher tells students what to learn and how to learn it, or andragogy where the teacher guides adult students toward self-directed learning, heutagogy gives the learner control over his or her own intellectual and creative growth.

Heutagogy is a non-linear, adaptive approach to education where capacity building is emphasised, rather than competency acquisition. Students acquire metacognitive awareness, double-loop learning capabilities, and problem-solving autonomy that are required to navigate increasingly complex and uncertain socio-technological environments. But the shift from traditional pedagogical methodologies to heutagogical autonomy in an educational context extends beyond the theoretical support; it requires a thorough deconstruction of rigid, transmission-oriented educational systems.

1.2 Policy Framework: 2020 and Learner Centric Mandate

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is one of the most comprehensive policy initiatives in the history of the country since independence. NEP 2020, recognising the limitations of an overly examination-centric system built on rote learning, strongly advocates for a holistic reform. The policy is intended to move toward "learner-centred" education, characterised by interdisciplinary flexibility, ongoing formative assessment, credit mobility through the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and the implementation of digital learning frameworks. The NEP 2020 recommends an educational structure that allows students to choose, pursue interdisciplinary interests and participate in experiential learning. In theory, these policy aims are consistent with the principles of learner autonomy and self-directed development. However, the historical evidence in education shows that progressive policy frameworks tend to be institutionally weakened during the process of implementation. There is a great risk that revolutionary ideas, filtered through established bureaucratic systems, turn into administrative bookkeeping when "flexibility" is reduced to uniform digital measurements when "learner-centeredness" becomes.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL STRUCTURE

2.1 Hase and Kenyon's Heutagogical Continuum:

Heutagogy is based on constructivist and humanistic educational theories with emphasis on learner autonomy, competence and introspection. Hase and Kenyon (2000, 2007) distinguish heutagogy from pedagogy and andragogy on a continuum of autonomy and development.

1. Pedagogy (Teacher-centred): Highly teacher authority, Linear curriculum Subject matter skills Single loop learning (correcting anticipated problems).
2. Andragogy (Self-Directed): Collaborative authority, objective-driven activities, independent skill building, task-centred problem solving.
3. Heutagogy (Self-Determined): More independence for the learner, non-linear pathways, double-loop learning (challenging assumptions and values associated with issues), enhancement of skills and metacognitive advancement.

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2.2 Rabindranath Tagore's Philosophy of Education and its Rejection of Mechanism

Before the advent of heutagogical theory, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) offered a deep, humanistic critique of formal education. Tagore's educational philosophy which he practiced by establishing Patha Bhavana and Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan was based on three basic principles – freedom (Mukti), naturalism (Prakriti) and joyful inquiry (Ananda). Tagore argued that the traditional colonial education in India, which was in the Western style, was like a factory, producing clerks to serve the colonial masters, instead of independent intellectuals. In works such as 'My School' and 'The Centre of Indian Culture', Tagore warned against the 'educational factory' – a system that separates children from nature, enforces artificial physical and mental discipline and measures intelligence by the capacity to absorb and regurgitate standardised curricula. Tagore advocated an education that was natural, rooted in the environment, driven by emotional and aesthetic curiosity, and respectful of the unique rhythm of each child.

3. RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S TOTA-KAHINI: A PEDAGOGICAL DIAGNOSTIC ALLEGORY

3.1 Breaking Down the Story

Tota-Kahini ("The Parrot's Tale") which was written in 1918 and published in Sabuj Patra is Tagore's most bitter satire on the mechanised educational system. In the story, a king comes across a wild, free parrot that sings instinctively, flies without restraint, but lacks "manners" or any knowledge of scripture. The King calls the bird "ignorant" and charges his nephews to teach it.

1. The Golden Cage: All the scholars declare that the parrot's natural nest is not good enough. They make a beautiful, elaborate golden cage. The cage mirrors modern institutional arrangements—oppressive, expensive, tightly regimented but also oppressive and constraining.
2. The Scribes and Textbooks: A great "tower of culture" is being built by a great army of scribes copying huge numbers of manuscripts. Knowledge is limited to textbooks; there is no intellectual development.
3. Clipping and Chaining: At the advent of dawn, the bird tries to flap its wings, or peck at the bars of its cage, but its wings are cut off, and its feet are bound in iron chains. This repression reflects the suppression of natural curiosity, physical movement and independent exploration.
4. Stuffing Procedure: Educator holds bird in one hand while holding text pages and a baton in the other. They make the parrot eat paper leaves till it can't sing or whistle or make any sound. This is the archetypal analogy for heavy memorisation: the brutish, mechanical imposition of external information upon a passive learner.
5. Systematic Self-Appreciation: The king examines the system and is pleased with the superb melodies, the glorious enclosure, the industrious clerks and the systematic administration. The system flourished, the overseers profited, and the critics paid the price. The only thing passed over is the bird itself.
6. The Outcome: The parrot is dead, stuffed with dry pages from a scripture. The king prods its dead carapace, but no song issues forth— only the dry rustle of paper leaves within its belly.

Tota-Kahini gives a systematic way of assessing current educational reforms. It asks: Does a reform only beautify the golden cage and employ more scribes, or does it break down the door and let the learner fly?

3.2 Allegorical Interpretation:

In 1918 he wrote "Tota-Kahini" ("The Parrot's Tale"), a brief, biting satire on the tragedy of formal education. The story starts with a wild parrot who calls and dances freely in the woods, but lacks the usual "etiquette" and reading abilities. The monarch, deciding that the bird needs to be taught, orders his scholars and advisers to teach the bird. The symbolic meaning of "Tota-Kahini" in relation to educational

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structures is both overt and prophetic:

1. **The Parrot (The Learner):** The Parrot stands for the lively, self-motivated learner, naturally curious, emotionally vibrant and creatively expressive. The parrot embodies the learner as they are driven by natural curiosity, emotional exuberance, impromptu melody, and independent inquiry. The parrot is, in heutagogical language, inherently autonomous and capable of self-directed development prior to the imposition of institutional norms.
2. **Golden Cage (Institutional Framework):** Built by goldsmiths at enormous public expense. It signifies magnificent educational structures, digital learning environments, regulatory arrangements and physical or digital imprisonment. While striking to outside viewers, it is inherently confining for the resident.
3. **Feeding manuscript pages (repetitive guidelines & curriculum excess):** Rather than letting the bird find food naturally, academics tear pages out of sacred texts and force the bird to eat them. This refers to mechanical educational models, i.e. "the banking model" that understands the learning of knowledge with the volume of content and syllabus coverage, without taking into account if the material is understood, assimilated or meaningful.
4. **The Pundits and Scholars (Systematic Instructors):** Academics that accumulate endless documents, copy writings and compulsively insert fragmented pages into the parrot's mouth, symbolising educators reduced to mere curriculum fulfillers and bureaucratic agents.
5. **The King and Royal Auditors (Educational Authorities & Accreditation Organisations):** Inspectors examine the gilded cage; are impressed with the monetary contribution; review the paperwork and pronounce the educational project a great success without ever assessing the parrot's well-being or singing ability.
6. **The Scribes and Craftsmen (EdTech providers & Bureaucratic Intermediaries):** A broad network of secondary beneficiaries who are benefitted from the educational system but are indifferent to educational outcomes.
7. **The death of the parrot (The dismantling of learner autonomy):** The inevitable end where the parrot's natural song is silenced, its belly filled with paper, its shape lifeless. But when the King prods the bird, all that comes out is the crinkling of parchment.

3.3 The Dynamics of "Rote Stuffing:

The central metaphor of "Tota-Kahini" is the imposition of text on the body.

> *"The Pundits, with a quill in one hand and a manuscript in the other, stuffed the torn pages down the parrot's throat. The bird could no longer sing; it could only flutter its wings in agony. The scholars exclaimed, 'Look at how much knowledge is entering the bird!'*

This haunting picture conveys the notion of "rote stuffing." In mechanistic education, learning is a matter of how much content has been covered. Achievement is measured by the amount of material covered, whether or not the learner can assimilate, understand or find meaning in the material. This process replaces intrinsic motivation with extrinsic coercion, resulting in a learner who is passive, compliant, and ultimately dead.

4. COMPARATIVE STUDY: NEP 2020 GUIDELINES VS. DOMINANT ROTE LEARNING FRAMEWORKS

NEP 2020 brings a paradigm shift in the structure to rectify the systemic issues highlighted in Tota-Kahini.

4.1 Leaving the 'Golden Cage': Flexibility of Education and Interdisciplinary Approaches

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In the conventional Indian education system, students are forced to stick to strict academic streams from Grade 11 onwards (Science, Commerce or Humanities). This structural constraint is a reflection of Tagore's gilded cage – a rigid framework that presumes uniformity of cognitive tendencies for all students of a particular stream. Rigid divisions are clearly abolished by NEP 2020. Section 4.3 of the policy emphasises on a flexible curriculum that allows a student to study Physics, Fashion Design and Indian Classical Music simultaneously. The Four-Year Multidisciplinary Undergraduate Program (FYUGP) in higher education has Multiple Entry and Multiple Exit (MEME) options enabled through an Academic Bank of Credits (ABC). From a heutagogical perspective, this structural flexibility changes learning from a linear, pre-defined process to a self-organised framework. The student becomes a participatory co-creator of his/her own intellectual journey, reflecting Tagore's assertion that education should encompass the whole range of human traits.

4.2 From Leaf-Stuffing to Knowledge Creation: Experiential and Inquiry-Based Learning

The most striking image in Tota-Kahini is of pages of books being stuffed into the parrot's beak till his belly is full of dried papers. This is an example of the epistemic violence of content saturation, a state of affairs in which curricula are evaluated by the number of textbook pages covered, not by the depth of conceptual understanding. NEP 2020 addresses this issue by mandating to simplify the curriculum to essential concepts so that critical thinking and inquiry driven education is enabled. Section 4.5 shifts the educational base to experiential learning.

- Experiential education, storytelling, and the fusion of arts and athletics:

  Making theory come alive through personal experience.

- Scientific mindset and proactive problem solving:

  Dynamic hypothesis evaluation rather than passive acceptance.

- Vocational integration from Grade 6:

  Integrate hands-on skills (carpentry, pottery, coding, agriculture) across a 10-day "bagless period" to bring back the value of labour and connect academic learning with practical application.

This is in line with Tagore's approach at Santiniketan, where education was part of daily life, seasonal festivities and practical work, keeping knowledge alive and relevant rather than theoretical and dead.

4.3 Epistemic Emancipation: Education in Indigenous Languages & Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Tagore argued that to make a foreign language the medium of instruction for young children is detrimental to their cognitive development, detaching their thinking from their emotional and social contexts. In Tota-Kahini, the parrot's natural song is considered primitive noise, of no value, and external scriptures are thrust upon it. NEP 2020 (Section 4.11) states that the medium of instruction should be the home language, mother tongue, local language, regional language, where possible, up to at least Grade 5 and ideally up to Grade 8 and beyond. Psycholinguistic research shows that the most successful development of basic literacy and cognitive skills occurs when new ideas are introduced in the child's regional language. Furthermore, NEP 2020 has a strong emphasis on the inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), tribal values and indigenous scientific/artistic expressions in the core curriculum. The policy aims to decolonise Indian education by affirming local cultural knowledge systems, thus liberating the learner from epistemic alienation.

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4.4 Reimagining Evaluation: Holistic Assessment and PARAKH

In "Tota-Kahini", the system is tested upon the physical presence of the cage, the product of the scribes, and the functional silence of the bird. The official assessment completely bypasses the bird's internal death since the metrics measure bureaucratic compliance and not actual vitality. The traditional Indian board examinations work in a similar manner, testing a student's ability to memorise and reproduce pre-decided content within time constraints and pressure.

The NEP 2020 calls for a complete transformation of evaluation methods:

- **Move from summative to formative assessment:** Emphasise continuous conceptual understanding, higher-order cognitive skills and analytical reasoning rather than rote learning for annual examination.
- **Creation of PARAKH:** a national evaluation centre, to ensure standardisation of competency-based assessments across school boards.
- **Holistic 360-Degree Progress Report:** Self-assessment, peer assessment and educator assessment in cognitive, emotional and psychomotor domains. The NEP 2020 has incorporated self and peer evaluation; thus, establishing a core heutagogical tenet: metacognition. The student is encouraged to reflect on their educational path, to evaluate their peers, and to develop self-regulatory skills instead of being a passive object of external evaluation.

5. ANALYTICAL INTEGRATION: ASSESSING NEP 2020 VIA TAGORE'S PERSPECTIVES

The NEP 2020 at first sight seems to provide a progressive framework, but a critical analysis through the lens of Tagore's philosophy reveals inherent structural tensions, implementation risks and ideological contradictions.

5.1 Theoretical Actualisation of Tagore's Ideals: Convergence

There is a clear congruence between the aspirational essence of NEP 2020 and Tagore's humanistic perspective of education.

1. Holistic Humanism: NEP 2020 redefines the purpose of education not as a tool for economic benefit but for the development of human potential, ethical integrity, and aesthetic sensibility, as envisioned by Tagore in the concept of Purna Manush (the complete human).
2. Pedagogical Joy: The policy repeatedly stresses the need for joyful, no-pressure learning environments, directly countering the stifling, anxiety-inducing academic culture critiqued in Tota-Kahini.
3. Independence and Adaptability: NEP 2020's provision of allowing students to choose subject combinations, exit points and pace resonates with heutagogical self-determination and Tagore's plea for intellectual liberty.

5.2 Divergence: The Risk of 'Gold-plating Cage'

The danger, of course, lies in the hand of bureaucratic application. In Tota-Kahini, the King's nephews did not want to destroy the bird but to teach it through elaborate, well-endowed institutional structures. When the bird died, the goldsmiths and the scribes and cage-keepers and officials grew rich. Contemporary educational reform risks reproducing this very dynamic through hyper-standardization of a technocratic kind.

1. **Centralised Digital Control:** The ease of mobility is facilitated by initiatives like Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR), and national digital platforms (DIKSHA, SWAYAM), but they also establish a centralised system of monitoring

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and governance of education. If digital monitoring is an end in itself, it replaces physical enclosures with online surveillance systems.

Moreover, the prerecorded video modules, the automated multiple-choice assessments, and the algorithmic monitoring systems often mirror the mechanical indoctrination of the pundits. Learners sit still in front of screens, processing pre-packaged material designed to produce a consistent outcome.

Just as the king in "Tota-Kahini" was lured by the glittering golden cage, today's education leaders often extol the virtues of sleek Learning Management Systems (LMS), data-driven dashboards, and digital infrastructures, while ignoring student alienation, screen fatigue, and the loss of intrinsic motivation.

2. **Standardisation vs. Organic Diversity:** NEP 2020 promotes localised and adaptable education but simultaneously values central organisations (NTA, PARAKH, HECI) to regulate entrance assessments, educational outcomes, and institutional accreditation. Secondary school behaviour is still heavily influenced by high-pressure competitive assessments (CUET, NEET, JEE, etc.). While university admissions continue to be linked to high-stakes standardised tests, classrooms will continue to be exam-preparation canters, regardless of policy discourse.
3. **The "Punditocracy" in Academia: Exam Culture and the Decline of Educator Autonomy** NEP 2020 expects the teachers to shift from the traditional teaching to mentoring and facilitating self-learning. But in most educational institutions, there is a general trend toward an all-pervasive 'audit culture'. Teachers are put through continuous administrative reporting, accreditation forms (NAAC, NIRF, etc.), constant outcome assessment and standard metric observation. The scholars in Tagore's fable, "Tota-Kahini" were so busy preserving the cage and recording their methods for the King's inspectors that they did not notice the death of the bird. There is a striking parallel for modern educators:
    - **Administrative Burden:** Educators devote excessive time to compliance paperwork, mapping course objectives to convoluted frameworks, and maintaining LMS platforms, which restricts their capacity for compassionate mentorship, individualised support, or creative curriculum development.
    - **De-professionalization of Teaching:** If curricula and assessment standards are too standardised and imposed by higher authorities, teacher autonomy is reduced and teaching becomes deprofessionalised. A teacher who has no pedagogical freedom cannot empower heutagogical agency in students.

6. ADVISORY RECOMMENDATIONS:

According to the findings of this study, the following concrete recommendations for policy and implementations are proposed:

1. **Deconstruct silos and rationalise administrative metrics:** The regulatory bodies in higher education (UGC, AICTE, NAAC) should minimise unnecessary document requirements and shift the focus of accreditation from infrastructural compliance to qualitative measures of student autonomy, innovative contributions, and faculty-student mentorship.
2. **Create Heutagogical Incubators in Higher Education:** Universities should create flexible "curiosity labs" or "independent study modules" where students can create, think , implement, and assess self-directed interdisciplinary projects under the mentorship of faculty. Additionally, art, music, exploration of nature, and reflective journaling should be incorporated into higher education as critical elements of intellectual, emotional, and ecological development. Digital Pedagogy,

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Educational Technology programs under PM e-VIDYA and SWAYAM should revamp their online resources to go beyond passive lecture videos and multiple-choice tests Digital platforms should incorporate interactive peer-review discussions, open-ended project submissions and collaborative problem-solving environments.

3. **Revise Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Training:** NCTE and SCERTs must revise the curricula of teacher education incorporating the heutagogical principles, the action research, the reflective teaching methods and the Tagorean eco-pedagogy so that the teachers can blossom into confident facilitators of student independence.
4. **Foster Student Well-Being and Qualitative Assessment:** Educational institutions should enhance quantitative credit tracking with qualitative e-portfolios, reflective learning journals, and holistic self-assessment systems to gauge emotional, ethical, and metacognitive development in addition to academic skills.

7. CONCLUSION:

"Tota-Kahini" is a perennial warning against educational systems that mistake bureaucratic complexity for real knowledge, confinement for growth, and rote learning for intellectual awakening. The parrot's real misfortune was not its neglect, but its systematic destruction by an institution that claimed to offer education. The National Education Policy 2020 provides an aspirational theoretical foundation to break this cycle. Its emphasis on multi-disciplinary flexibility, experiential learning, instruction in the mother tongue and formative assessment reflects a notable conceptual congruence with both heutagogical principles and Tagore's humanistic ideals. But Documented Policy alone cannot liberate the learner. If implementation is dependent on centralised control, technocratic standardisation, poor infrastructure and a never-ending exam-focused coaching culture, NEP 2020 may only be an ornament on the golden cage. Real educational change requires opening the cage, entrusting teachers as creative facilitators, students as autonomous agents, and education as what Tagore envisioned as a natural, joyful, spiritual and liberating in the true sense of the term.

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