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Cultural Gene Perspectives on the Digitization of Indian Higher Education: Origins, Conflicts and Evolution

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Abstract

Drawing on cultural gene theory, this study examines the cultural origins, conflicts, and evolution of higher education digitalization in India across four dimensions: educational objectives, educational management, educational subjects, and educational practice. The findings indicate that India's "Brahman-Atman" philosophy has shaped four major cultural origins in higher education: the "Dharma" norm, the "Guru-Śāstra" system, the "purity" orientation, and the "cultivation" metaphor. In the process of digitalization, the "Dharma" norm gives rise to tensions between instrumental rationality and the principle of prioritizing duty over profit, evolving through the integration of nationalism and individualism. The "Guru-Śāstra" system generates conflicts between technological centralization and institutional autonomy, gradually developing through a balance between centralized and democratic governance. The "purity" orientation creates tensions between educational equality and religious hierarchy, evolving from a knowledge-based hierarchy toward technological equality. Meanwhile, the "cultivation" metaphor highlights the tension between the "digital Leviathan" and the essence of education, ultimately developing into a balance between preserving educational essence and enhancing educational quality. This study calls for greater attention to the cultural tensions associated with the large-scale implementation of digital technologies in higher education and emphasizes the importance of preserving the cultural essence of education throughout the digital transformation process.

Keywords: *Indian higher education; educational digitalization; cultural gene*



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Introduction

India's unique position in the global digital industry stems not only from its strategic layout of digital technology policies but also from the support of its higher education system and the creative transformation of its indigenous cultural genes. With the increasing interconnection between the "Digital India" strategy and the *National Education Policy 2020* (NEP 2020), India has achieved certain progress in advancing higher education digitalization. The key link in this process lies not only in the continuous construction of technological infrastructure but also in the successful integration of digital technology into the local cultural system (Zhu & Hu, 2022a). In this process, how technology adapts to Sanskritic culture and forms an educational ecology that integrates technological logic with the Vedic philosophy of "Brahman-Atman" becomes particularly important.

India is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic country with rich cultural heritage. As a typical region of "civilizational layering," traditional and modern, indigenous and colonial values coexist in Indian culture. Consequently, the digitalization of Indian education faces multiple cultural tensions. Although NEP 2020 emphasizes that the education system must be rooted in Indian culture (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020), core traditional ideas such as "Dharma" still inevitably confront the impact of modernity. In this context, how to balance the humanistic nature of education with digitalization, effectively avoid cultural assimilation, alienation, and dilution caused by educational digitalization, and safeguard its own cultural core have become key propositions for Indian education policy in the digital era.

Although existing research has focused on strategic measures such as reform models (Yan and Duan, 2024) and talent cultivation practices (Wang, Wu, & Zhu, 2022) in the digitalization of Indian higher education few studies have examined its cultural characteristics from a dynamic, constructive, and critical cultural perspective to analyze the deep mechanisms of policy formulation and implementation. Based on cultural gene theory, this paper attempts



to clarify three main questions: What is the cultural background of Indian higher education digitalization? What impacts does Indian higher education digitalization bring to the indigenous cultural system? How do Indian policies and culture evolve in response to these impacts? By addressing these questions, this paper seeks to outline the “cultural dimension” of Indian higher education digitalization, reveal the dialectical relationship between technological development and cultural structure in India’s digitalization practice, examine the potential alienation of traditional values in the process of large-scale technology application, and provide analytical perspectives for the development of educational technology theory in postcolonial contexts.

Analytical Framework: Higher Education Digitalization from the Perspective of Cultural Gene Theory

(i) Core Connotations and Evolutionary Context of Cultural Gene Theory

British evolutionary biologist Dawkins (1981) first coined the concept of “meme” in *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1981), analogizing cultural transmission to biological inheritance and positing that “cultural genes” are the basic units of culture, spreading in society through imitation, replication, and selection. This academic metaphor derived from biological genetics gradually evolved into “cultural gene theory.”

Since its inception, this theory has faced debates between “innate cultural transmission” and “social construction.” The core controversies include: first, reductionism—simplifying complex cultural phenomena into “gene-like” units may neglect social context and human agency; second, opposition to social constructivism—emphasizing “gene replication” alone ignores that culture is dynamically shaped by group interaction, power relations, and historical context (Wu & Li, 2020). Building on this, cultural gene theory emphasizes breaking away from the static analytical framework of traditional cultural studies and constructs a genetic explanation model of cultural dissemination from a dynamic evolutionary perspective: deconstructing cultural phenomena into basic units that can be replicated, reorganized, and mutated, achieving cultural evolution through the dual pathways of vertical inheritance and



horizontal integration. Meanwhile, the theory emphasizes the compatibility between cultural genes and society, regarding “cultural genes” as products of social interaction rather than independent entities. After more than forty years of academic debate, the theory has developed four major research paradigms: cultural evolution, information theory, thought contagion, and semiotics (Liu, 2010). Among these, the cultural evolution paradigm has special explanatory power in educational research due to its profound interpretation of cultural inheritance mechanisms.

The cultural evolution paradigm can be summarized in six core propositions:

- (1) **Unity**: As the smallest functional unit of cultural inheritance, cultural genes carry civilizational codes through values, cognitive patterns, institutional norms, and other elements.
- (2) **Heritability**: Achieved through mechanisms such as educational acquisition, social discipline, and environmental shaping for intergenerational transmission.
- (3) **Variability**: Adaptive changes occur in the context of technological innovation and cultural collision.
- (4) **Selectivity**: Dominant cultural genes gain advantages in resource competition.
- (5) **Complexity**: Heterogeneous cultural genes generate new cultural forms through “grafting-recombination” (Dawkins, 1981).
- (6) **Time lag**: The path dependence of traditional genes and the forward-looking demands of emerging genes create a “cultural time lag,” posing challenges to cultural genes.

(ii) Adaptability of Cultural Gene Theory to This Study

Cultural gene theory provides a unique dynamic evolutionary perspective for analyzing educational digitalization, but its application in educational research must be situated within a broader theoretical spectrum. Theoretical research on educational digitalization mainly presents two paradigms: technological determinism and social shaping theory. The former emphasizes technology itself as the driver of change, echoing the “replication logic” of cultural gene theory; the latter focuses on how social culture shapes technological applications. By integrating the laws of technological dissemination with social selection pressures, cultural gene theory focuses on the deep cultural structure—i.e., the inheritance, variation, and selection



mechanisms of genetic units under technological impact—revealing the micro-foundations of cultural continuity and transformation in the process of technological transplantation. This effectively bridges the theoretical divide between the two paradigms and provides a more systematic analytical framework for understanding educational digitalization. However, the theory also faces controversies, such as whether the concept of “cultural gene” is overly reified and whether it can fully explain culture as a product of social construction. To enhance the cultural relevance of theoretical interpretation, this study also draws on the idea of “alternative modernity” proposed by Indian scholar Nandy. Nandy emphasizes overcoming the mentality of “self-colonization” through cultural consciousness, criticizing Western technocentrism and reconstructing modernity based on Indian cultural traditions (Nandy, 2017). Thus, “alternative modernity” reveals the possibility for non-Western societies to creatively respond to modern challenges based on their own cultural resources. This is inherently connected to cultural gene theory’s focus on the adaptive transformation of indigenous genes, providing both a critical perspective for analyzing “gene inheritance” and a possible pathway for revealing the causes of cultural variation and conflict in educational digitalization (Zhu & Hu, 2022b). It thus offers a comprehensive framework for systematically analyzing the cultural origins, conflicts, and evolution processes in Indian higher education digitalization.

In summary, this study employs cultural gene theory as a cultural lens for the digitalization of Indian higher education, supplemented by Nandy’s (2017) perspective of “alternative modernity.” Its explanatory power is mainly reflected in three aspects: First, micro-analysis of cultural inheritance and transformation mechanisms. The Indian education system carries multiple cultural gene units, including the philosophical gene of “Brahman-Atman,” the social gene of the “caste system,” and the pedagogical gene of “meditative cultivation.” Tracing the transmission and evolution pathways of these gene units in higher education digitalization can reveal the survival logic and transformation mechanisms of traditional cultural genes in the digital-era educational field. Second, explanation of cultural variation drivers. In the context of globalization, Indian educational digitalization faces both the implantation of Western cultural



genes and resistance from indigenous cultural genes. The dimensions of variability, selectivity, and complexity within the theoretical framework can effectively explain why certain cultural genes exhibit greater technological inclusiveness. Third, presentation of cultural evolution pathways. The phenomenon of “differential adaptation” generated in the digitalization process can be elucidated through the gene competition model.

Brahman-Atman: Cultural Origins of Indian Higher Education Digitalization

India exhibits a unique characteristic of “religion-education interpenetration” (Wang, 2009). Deeply embedded in daily life, religiosity shapes its educational practice paradigms. From the forest schools of the Vedic era to the virtual classrooms of the digital age, the digitalization of Indian higher education can be regarded as a contemporary expression of the philosophical motif of “Brahman-Atman” within a technological context. Its cultural origins are primarily manifested in the following four dimensions.

(i) The “Dharma” Norm in Educational Objectives: Cultural Core of “Prioritizing Duty over Profit” and Individualism

Ancient Indian education was essentially religious and moral education, with the core goal of achieving “Brahman-Atman” (i.e., saving the individual soul and attaining otherworldly happiness)—in other words, seeking “liberation” (*moksha*). How is liberation attained? Brahmanical and other religious traditions proclaimed that wealth and desire are the values pursued for happiness in this life, but the prerequisite for these pursuits is adherence to *Dharma*. When *artha* (profit), *kāma* (desire), and *Dharma* (duty) could not all be fulfilled simultaneously, the superior seek Dharma, the middling seek profit, and the inferior seek desire (Vyāsa, 2005). Thus, the pursuit of and adherence to “Dharma,” along with the relative negation of “profit” and “desire,” became the core meaning of educational objectives. The concept of Dharma, deeply ingrained and far-reaching, constructed the underlying logic of India’s religious education system: guided by the afterlife, it cultivates present-day Hindus into religious individuals who “prioritize duty over profit” and fulfill the duties prescribed by religious “Dharma,” thereby maintaining religious order. Here, “Dharma” is both a universal social



moral code—the “Dharma of humans”—and a distributive system of social roles and corresponding moral and behavioral standards—i.e., “everything in the universe has its own Dharma” (Zhu, 2000). Only when everyone abides by their own Dharma can society maintain harmony and unity. Thus, the concept of Dharma shares a certain isomorphism with contemporary notions of “responsibility and obligation.” As Nehru (Nehru, 1956) stated, Dharma “is the concept of duty, the concept of fulfilling obligations to oneself and to others.”

It is evident that the concept of “Dharma” within the “Brahman-Atman” philosophy places educational objectives in the dual dimensions of “maintaining cosmic order” and “achieving individual liberation.” On one hand, “Dharma” establishes a hierarchical social order, identity order, and moral system; on the other hand, the process by which individuals identify and practice their own “Dharma” carries a certain social constructivist character. As Song (2010,) pointed out, although the concept of “Dharma” emphasizes social order, its core has a strong individualistic tendency. This individualism, when transposed into educational objectives, translates into questions of “what responsibilities to undertake” and “how to attain liberation.” For instance, Indian educator Vivekananda (1989) believed that the purpose of education is to awaken the “potential divinity” within individuals and achieve spiritual freedom through self-realization, rather than mechanical knowledge indoctrination. Thus, “prioritizing duty over profit” and an individualism oriented toward spiritual liberation became cultural genes in Indian education that emphasize freedom, de-emphasize profit, and pursue self-realization. This gene continues to manifest in the digital-era higher education field in forms such as “digital Dharma” (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025). For individuals, the focus is on how to seek ultimate liberation in the digital age; for the state, it emphasizes a new educational ethics, striving to clearly define national and individual responsibilities in the context of technological empowerment.

(ii) The “Guru-Śāstra” System in Educational Management: Dialectical Unity of “Venerating Knowledge” and “Guru-Based Governance”

Under the influence of the “Brahman-Atman” concept, knowledge was regarded as



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divinely revealed—i.e., “the revelation of Brahma”—and learning was an individual’s duty to obtain a “second birth” (Lu, 2016). Knowledge transmission was sanctified by the Brahmin priestly class. Over historical evolution, India developed an educational management system intertwining the sanctity of knowledge with the authority of religious governance. The former can be summarized as “venerating knowledge” (*jñāna-māhātmya*), and the latter as “Guru-based governance” (*guru-śāsana*). The core of this system is reflected in three aspects: First, sanctification of knowledge. Knowledge is regarded as the “third eye,” helping individuals understand the subjective and objective worlds and approach “Brahma” (Wang, 2023). Thus, acquiring knowledge is both an earthly duty and a path to liberation. Second, sanctification of identity. Brahmin *gurus* (traditional teachers) “are regarded as disseminators of divine revelation and hold an exalted status” (Shi, 2023). Third, sanctification of space. Places such as forest schools became sacred spaces through rituals, and educational authority derived from the strict discipline of the *brahmacharya* (student) stage, with education enjoying a high degree of autonomy (Wang, 2023).

(iii) The “Purity” Orientation in Educational Subjects: Segregation Inclination Rooted in Sanctity

The traditional Indian view of purity concerning educational subjects is essentially the hierarchization of knowledge distribution. Since knowledge is “sacred,” its distribution is naturally confined to the “pure” castes. The *Upaniṣads* record that in reincarnation, those of good conduct are reborn as Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, or Vaiśyas, while those of impure conduct are reborn as dogs, pigs, or *Caṇḍālas* (Anonymous, 2010). This concept—*karma* and rebirth—used “birth-based determinism” to hierarchize and segregate different castes. In education, the purity view naturally led to the segregation of educational subjects in ancient India. Religious education was generally reserved for the “twice-born” clean castes—Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas—while Śūdras and “untouchables” were excluded from religious education and denied the right to study scriptures. Many *gurus*, to maintain their own purity, also refused to disseminate knowledge to these groups. The segregation of knowledge distribution



corresponded to the segregation of social division of labor: Brahmins, being closest to the gods, were the pure people of reason and refinement, representing civilization and nobility, and thus engaged in knowledge transmission; Scheduled Castes and Dalits, by contrast, engaged in “impure” occupations such as scavenging and washing clothes. In traditional Indian society, the doctrine of karma and rebirth, along with its corresponding purity view, continuously reinforced the caste system centered on Brahmins (Weber, 2020).

(iv) The “Cultivation” Metaphor in Educational Practice: The “Inward” Method of Meditation and Austerity

Meditation and austerity (*tapas*) are core methods for realizing “Brahman-Atman.” It is believed that through these practices, human thought can extend infinitely, “roaming freely through the cosmos,” emphasizing self-cultivation, realization, and active approach to “Brahma.” Forest culture, such as the *vānaprastha* (hermitage) stage, and the *brahmacharya* learning process—comprising “understanding, meditation, memorization, and concentration”—are important methodological manifestations. Thus, ancient Indian educational content was divided into two categories: one was theoretical courses oriented toward meditation, primarily covering the Vedas, ethics, theology, Sanskrit, etc.; the other was practical courses oriented toward austerity, including various training activities such as serving teachers, alms-gathering, astrology, logic, mathematics, military science, sports, arts, and various religious and sacrificial activities like prayer (Shi, 2023). From the connotations of “Brahman-Atman,” it is not difficult to infer that in traditional Indian culture, seemingly “outward-seeking” ascetic practices were essentially in service of “inward-seeking” meditation; they were the methodology of “cultivation” rather than the core process of education. However, this educational practice concept of “persisting in inner truth” clearly faces difficulties in the digital age, such as “valuing spirit over materiality” and the inability to conduct process-oriented, visualized, and quantifiable evaluations—giving rise to a series of teaching quality assessment issues in the digitalization of Indian higher education.



Gene Competition: Cultural Conflicts in Indian Higher Education Digitalization

Cultural genes exhibit a dual-edged character in the digital transformation of higher education. Genes compatible with the digital age can facilitate transformation, whereas incompatible genes trigger cultural conflicts and adaptation crises. During the digitalization of Indian higher education, four cultural conflicts have emerged around the concepts of responsibility, power, purity, and quality.

(i) Impact on the Concept of Responsibility: Competition between Instrumental Rationality and “Prioritizing Duty over Profit”

The cultural tension in Indian higher education digitalization regarding the purpose of education is primarily manifested as a structural contradiction between instrumental rationality from the West and traditional value rationality. During the British colonial period, the cultural genes implanted in the Indian higher education system laid the groundwork for contemporary value conflicts. The *Wood's Despatch* established an elite education system aimed at cultivating “standardized technical bureaucrats to meet the needs of imperial governance” (Sankhder, 1975), exhibiting significant instrumental rationality. Contemporary policies such as NEP 2020 emphasize that competency training standards should directly correspond to 21st-century skill requirements (Seth, Lowe, & Galhotra, 2023), aiming to increase the vocational education enrollment target to 50%, with assessment systems increasingly focusing on employable skills such as digital literacy and collaboration (Mandal, 2024). At the policy orientation level, these measures subtly enhance the instrumentalist and utilitarian tendencies of education. While placing greater emphasis on “usefulness,” the utilitarian tendency of digitalization policies continuously challenges the traditional Indian educational philosophy of pursuing spiritual elevation and ethical responsibility, immediately triggering students’ cultural identity crises and eroding youth’s sense of national responsibility and cultural sovereignty.

Under the contemporary wave of globalization, this value conflict is concretely manifested in talent mobility. For example, Xiang (2012), through an ethnographic study of the global mobility of Indian IT laborers, found that Indian tech talent holds a distinct “quantitative



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advantage” in Silicon Valley, reflecting the problem of domestic talent drain. “High-paying employment” is becoming the primary motivation for Indian students’ pursuit of education. The dissipation of the “prioritizing duty over profit” concept and the expansion of instrumental rationality are increasingly alienating Indian higher education into a “human capital processing plant” (Sonu, Jawahar, & Saini, 2022).

(ii) Impact on the Concept of Power: Competition between Technological Centralization and Guru-Based Autonomy

In the contemporary field of Indian higher education digitalization, “venerating knowledge” is reflected in the gradual replacement of traditional knowledge authority by technological rationality, while “Guru-based governance” is manifested as the institutionalized infiltration of values. Thus, the competition of cultural genes is reflected, on one hand, in the conflict between technological sanctity against the backdrop of instrumental rationality and the sanctity of knowledge in “venerating knowledge”; on the other hand, it is embodied in the game between state management and the tendency toward local autonomy within “Guru-based governance.”

The *Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976* placed education in the “Concurrent List,” granting both the central and state governments legislative power, with states retaining substantial decision-making authority over educational affairs (Kaushik & Gupta, 2022). Contemporary Indian state governments are often controlled by regional political parties, forming a multi-power center joint governance structure with the central government, reflecting India’s local autonomy gene. After the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014, strategies such as “Digital India” employed digital technology to strengthen centralization, intensifying the game between centralized management and traditional autonomy culture in higher education. For instance, NEP 2022 attempted to incorporate local universities into the central digital governance system through technical standards such as the “Academic Bank of Credits” (ABC) and the “National Digital Educational Architecture” (NDEAR). The ABC, as a centrally managed “credit digital repository,” mandated universities



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to integrate into a unified system, effectively using technical means to weaken local autonomy and the legitimacy of local knowledge systems (Aithal, 2020). However, the diverse local languages and dialects of India carry indigenous knowledge that is difficult to integrate into the centralized framework (Das & Gupta, 2021), further triggering practical difficulties and controversies. For example, against the backdrop of the Indian government promoting “One Nation, One Digital Platform,” Tamil Nadu has developed a localized online knowledge repository, the “Tamil Virtual Knowledge Park,” based on its own traditional culture—essentially an assertion and expression of local “digital sovereignty.” Conflicts continuously arise between the federal government’s construction of a “single education market” and the reality of multiculturalism over issues of “data sovereignty.”

Although the *Constitution of India* abolished untouchability, the deep operation of caste perpetuates long-standing educational inequality. The gross enrollment ratios of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) have long been significantly below the national average. For instance, in 2021–2022, the gross enrollment ratios for SC and ST were 25.8% and 21.2%, respectively, while the national average was 28.4%, reflecting the tenacity of structural exclusion (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2024). Knowledge production in India is permeated by caste power. Brahmin scholars continuously reconstruct caste issues through racialization strategies, attributing social inequality to “biological differences,” portraying themselves as producers of “scientific” and “rational” knowledge, thereby legitimizing the caste system and perpetuating their monopoly on academic authority (Chairez-Garza, 2024). In the digital age, with the development and deployment of various educational platforms, the monopoly on knowledge is continuously being broken. Sacred knowledge once confined to the clean castes is becoming readily accessible knowledge products on digital platforms. However, the conflicts derived from the traditional purity view are increasingly shifting from issues of knowledge accessibility to issues of technology accessibility. For example, surveys indicate that higher castes enjoy greater computer usage privileges than disadvantaged groups. A 2024 survey showed that only 6.7% of schools are equipped with functional teaching computers, but



the rates in higher-caste-concentrated areas such as Chandigarh (39.9%) and Delhi (35.4%) are far higher than those in disadvantaged-group-concentrated areas like Assam (1.7%) and Bihar (1.9%) (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2022). Additionally, only about 6% of SC and ST households have computers at home (Rajam, Reddy, & Banerjee, 2021), and their ICT usage tends to be entertainment-oriented rather than for learning purposes (Kamath, 2018). These imbalances in technology distribution limit the opportunities for Scheduled disadvantaged groups to acquire digital skills. As Xiang (2012) pointed out, the boom of India's information technology industry is built upon "institutionalized inequality." While digital transformation superficially helps narrow traditional inequalities, it simultaneously perpetuates and intensifies traditional inequalities through the formation of a "technological hierarchy."

(iv) Impact on the Concept of Quality: Competition between the "Digital Leviathan" and Educational Ontology

Against the backdrop of rapid higher education expansion, India urgently needs to improve higher education quality, and digital assessment technology provides an important lever for quality evaluation and enhancement. Before independence, India had only 20 universities and approximately 210,000 students (Li, 2019). The *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2019–2020* showed that by 2019–2020, India had 1,043 universities and approximately 38.54 million students—about 52 times more universities and 183.5 times more students than before independence (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2021). Although India significantly increased the number of higher education institutions and enrolled students, it neglected the reality of insufficient resources and funding for infrastructure and faculty. This emphasis on scale expansion over foundational investment, and on technological control over resource assurance, has left Indian higher education facing persistent quality challenges. In this context, traditional meditation traditions and quality standards focused on the spiritual world clearly cannot meet practical management needs. Establishing a fully node-digitized digital technology assessment system has become the optimal choice for improving evaluation levels and thereby enhancing higher education quality. Thus, the "Digital India"



initiative proposed constructing a digital governance system covering all educational elements. The Indian government, through accreditation bodies such as the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA), and evaluation frameworks like the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and the Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR), continuously refines quantifiable indicator systems for higher education quality evaluation. Additionally, SWAYAM has established a dedicated command center to track and evaluate course effectiveness using technical means and data analysis.

Although technological governance enhances management efficiency, it brings the hidden risk of a “Digital Leviathan”—the potential for digital technology to backlash against human society (Tang, 2018). This risk mainly includes three aspects: First, reshaping individual habits. Certification systems such as the *Central Sector Scheme of Scholarships for College and University Students* promote standardized competency certification, gradually displacing traditional meditative academic exploration with data-driven performance competition. Second, institutional alienation. NEP 2022 advocates “holistic education,” originally intended to integrate knowledge, skills, and values, emphasizing that education should transcend technological utilitarianism and focus on students’ multidimensional growth in intellect, morality, physical fitness, aesthetics, and social-emotional development (National Assessment and Accreditation Council, 2023). However, in the practice of higher education digitalization, it has been alienated into a collection of quantifiable technical indicators, with instrumental rationality expansion obscuring the essence of education. Third, deconstruction of cultural sovereignty. The standardized certification system implemented through the AQAR is essentially a transplantation of Western technology evaluation paradigms. This disciplinary thinking decomposes the holistic knowledge context into isolated technical indicators (NAAC, 2023), conflicting with India’s indigenous holistic educational view of “Brahman-Atman” and continuously challenging the cultural subjectivity of Indian education. Thus, the conflict between the digital-centrist quality view and the traditional meditative view emphasizing educational holism is increasingly evident.



(v). Differential Adaptation: Cultural Evolution in Indian Higher Education Digitalization

In the practice of higher education digitalization, Indian traditional cultural genes have not perished. Instead, through the mechanism of “differential adaptation,” they creatively integrate with global digital culture amid conflicts, generating a culturally evolved paradigm with local characteristics through adjustment, transformation, and absorption of new elements, achieving limited but distinct transformation.

(i) Educational Objectives: Penetration of Nationalism into Individualism

In the context of globalization, Western discourse—particularly utilitarian discourse—continuously squeezes the survival space of the traditional “prioritizing duty over profit” educational objective view. Taking the language of digital teaching resources as an example, Wikipedia has over 39.4 million English pages, while Hindi and Urdu have just over 100,000 each, and other major regional languages only around 10,000 each (Khokhar, 2016). This linguistic choice in digital scenarios itself becomes a pathway for cultural hegemony, deeply binding knowledge to Western culture and subtly shifting the learning motivations of Indian youth. The reconciliation of this conflict is not a simple matter of “the east wind prevailing over the west wind” or vice versa, but rather through differential adaptation: on one hand, resisting the impact of utilitarianism on “prioritizing duty over profit” and preserving some indigenous cultural space; on the other hand, transforming religiously defined “duty” into duty in the modern national sense—shifting from the individualism and individual spiritual liberation emphasized in traditional “Brahman-Atman” toward nationalism and the collective mission of serving the modern nation-state. Consequently, Indian higher education digitalization policies exhibit a dual cultural evolution trend.

The first is the collectivized reshaping of Dharma thought. The Indian government retains the ethical framework of duty within Dharma but extends its application from individual cultivation to the national community. In 1998, the Indian government proposed the strategic goal of becoming an “information technology superpower” and issued the *Information*



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Technology Action Plan, explicitly linking digital capacity to national security for the first time (Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, 1998). In 2015, the “Digital India” strategy was implemented, aiming to construct a complete ideological training framework through three pillars: digital infrastructure, digital services, and digital literacy cultivation (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2025). This transformed the individual practice of traditional Dharma into a collective mission in the digital age. Subsequently, the *National Digital Communications Policy 2018* proposed “ensuring digital sovereignty” (PIB Delhi, 2024), and *India Vision 2020* directly linked higher education digitalization with building a “knowledge society” (Planning Commission, Government of India, 2020). Through consistent policy texts, the Indian government attempts to modernize Dharma ethics and reconstruct national identity using digital technology.

The second is technology-driven national identity construction. Numerous knowledge-sharing platforms—such as the “One Nation, One Digital Platform” knowledge infrastructure, the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NMEICT) online education platform, and the National Knowledge Network (NKN)—are endowed with the name “national,” aiming to integrate national resources and strengthen “Indianness.” Meanwhile, although NEP 2020 emphasizes “digital empowerment,” it embeds “Indian Knowledge Systems” (IKS) in knowledge content to promote Indian spirit and cultivate identity. This effectively constructs a technology-based value dissemination channel, making it a new means for the “saffronization” of education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). According to the *Guidelines for Incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems in Higher Education Curricula* and the *Guidelines for Introduction of Indian Heritage and Culture Courses* issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC), undergraduate curricula must include 5% IKS credits (UGC, 2023), utilizing blended teaching to enhance dissemination efficiency. However, the content of IKS is strictly confined to Hindu nationalist narratives. For instance, during its first term, the Modi government made 1,334 revisions to 182 textbooks, deleting descriptions of Muslim rule in historical accounts and



increasing praise for Hindu dynasties (Jaferlot & Jairam, 2020). Meanwhile, digital education platforms such as SWAYAM emphasize and promote Hindi, directly echoing the BJP's advocacy of "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan" (Academics, 2024). These digital textbooks and platforms amplify the reach and influence of IKS, technically responding to India's historical dilemma of "non-stateness" and becoming tools for cultural integration in the digital age.

(ii) *Educational Management: Compromise between Centralized Governance and Local Governance*

Faced with the conflict between the traditional scholastic governance model interwoven with "venerating knowledge" and "Guru-based governance" and the efficiency and sharing demands of digitalization, the Indian higher education management system has moved toward pluralistic governance through differential adaptation. This is reflected in the continuous differentiation of the carriers of knowledge sanctity and the shift in governance structure from a binary opposition between "central and local" to diversification and pluralism.

First, the decentralization system has expanded, vertically constructing a four-level decentralized system of "national–state–local–institution." Since independence, India has established an education system where the central government and state governments cooperate in higher education management. The central government formulates guiding schemes, such as establishing the principle of "digital sovereignty" through the *National Digital Communications Policy 2018* to protect the core values of Dharma culture, and holds standard-setting authority through bodies like the UGC and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). State governments are primarily responsible for establishing, funding, and managing universities and colleges. For example, the Delhi Board of School Education is mainly responsible for formulating state-level education policies, supervising school management, and promoting educational reforms and digital education (National Informatics Centre, Government of India, 2024).

Second, the governance structure has diversified, horizontally constructing a four-dimensional collaboration mechanism of "government–enterprise–society–university."



Since India's independence, the central and state governments have long had divergent goals in higher education governance, particularly forming a "control–autonomy" game in funding allocation and quality standards (Carnoy & Dossani, 2013). Although this decentralization tradition triggers efficiency controversies, it has reserved institutional space for multi-stakeholder participation. In recent years, the Indian central government has gradually shifted to a "guide" role. NEP 2020 explicitly states that "public-private partnership" (PPP) is a core pathway for expanding quality education coverage (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). As early as the 1990s, India promoted the PPP model in higher education, with the private sector deeply participating in educational cooperation through infrastructure investment, curriculum development, etc. (Wei & Zhu, 2017). Under the digital wave, to promote PPP in the digital field and "bring in" large corporations, enterprises, and advanced technologies, the Indian government has collaborated with high-tech giants such as Microsoft, Google, and Amazon to advance educational digitalization. For instance, the National Commission for Women partnered with Facebook and the Peace Foundation Network to launch the "Digital Literacy Programme" for female university students, aiming to train 60,000 university women in major Indian cities in the safe use of the internet, social media, and email (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2019). As of the end of 2024, India had over 1.2 billion mobile users and over 600 million internet users, with its digital economy valued at \$200 billion, making it one of the fastest-growing countries in the global digital ecosystem (Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China, 2025). In this process, although the central government is the advocate and leader of digital transformation, state governments, academia, industry, and individual learners are all regarded as important participants and partners with relative independence (Carnoy & Dossani, 2013). As a result of cultural evolution, this multi-actor participatory decentralization model has, to some extent, resolved the long-standing conflicts between centralization and local autonomy surrounding the traditions of "venerating knowledge" and "Guru-based governance."



(iii) Educational Subjects: Transition from Knowledge Hierarchy to Technological Equalization

First, there is an exploitation of the positive implications of the traditional purity view in promoting educational technology popularization. India's higher education digitalization relies on its robust digital industry foundation. The reason India's digital industry flourished for a time is related to its status as an emerging field and service industry free from caste restrictions. Traditional occupational views helped India bypass industrialization and directly develop the service sector (Chen, 2013). The development of the information technology industry tore a gap in the traditional hierarchical system.

Second, there is a strengthening of inclusive infrastructure construction to enhance technological accessibility. Initially, India engaged in digital empowerment and digital resource compensation through digital infrastructure development. Through projects such as the Digital Village Program and the National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM), the government implemented differentiated infrastructure deployment, using Common Service Centres (CSCs) as one-stop channels to connect digital networks to villages and enhance digital technology accessibility for rural residents and disadvantaged groups. Simultaneously, leveraging "technology + human" and "internet + digital literacy education" as breakthrough points, it improved rural villagers' digital recognition and digital usage capabilities. Additionally, through the NDLM, millions of Indian citizens received necessary digital skills training and assessment certification. In 2023–2024, approximately 86.93% of Indian citizens received digital literacy training, with 65.09% obtaining certification (Chowdhury, 2024), potentially alleviating India's digital hierarchical barriers in both physical access and skills. With the implementation of initiatives such as BharatNet, GramNet, and JanWi-Fi, inclusive digital infrastructure gradually became widespread (Department of Telecommunications, 2018). Subsequently, the development of multilingual open educational resource repositories enhanced the linguistic compatibility of technology platforms. Taking the DIKSHA platform as an example, it currently supports more than 30 languages, and digital



resources in other languages are actively being developed to overcome the digital exclusion of SC/ST groups due to English proficiency (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2025). Currently, rural areas and SC/ST groups are accessing quality educational resources through various national digital platforms to learn knowledge and skills and adapt to the digital wave. Data indicate that in June 2019, rural internet users accounted for only 35.81% of total users; by June 2020, this proportion had risen to 39.13%, a year-on-year increase of 3.32% (Thadikaran & Chellaswamy, 2022, pp. 46–56). Registration data from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) for 2023 show that rural and tribal students constituted 51.42% of enrollments (IGNOU, 2023). Finally, through various digital literacy enhancement programs, the digital literacy of disadvantaged groups was directly improved. Through the implementation of initiatives such as the *Saakshar Bharat Programme*, the *New India Literacy Programme*, the *Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyaan (PMGDISHA)*, and the formulation of standards like the *Accessibility Guidelines and Standards for Higher Education* (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2021).

The first is the technologization of meditation and austerity. This involves organically integrating traditional meditative elements into modern online education concepts to enhance teaching quality. The meditation tradition shares certain compatibility with the concept of autonomous learning, emphasizing “autonomy” and “intrinsic drive,” which align with modern online education philosophies. For instance, Indian scholar Mitra proposed the “Self-Organized Learning Environment” (SOLE) pedagogy, emphasizing intrinsic drive and collaboration, with the teacher’s role shifting to a remote “facilitator” (Costa, 2014), echoing the spiritual guidance of traditional *gurus*. Additionally, austerity, as a technique for complete self-immersion, emphasizes self-discipline, perseverance, and immersive engagement, reflected in the use of new technologies to create focused learning environments.

The second is the transparentization of the meditation process. For instance, the National Knowledge Network (NKN), launched in 2009, aims to connect 1,500 institutions (Saxena & Mishra, 2012) for grid computing and resource sharing, establishing a



nationwide knowledge graph. It provides services such as national virtual classrooms, collaborative research, virtual libraries, computational resource sharing, grid computing, network technology testing platforms, e-governance, and cloud computing. This enables higher education institutions and other knowledge-producing bodies to work together, share knowledge resources, and conduct collaborative research, transforming the knowledge production process from the mystical “revelation of Brahma” into an explainable, operable cooperative process (Singh, Maity, & Sarkar 2013).

The technologization and transparentization of the meditation and austerity process have enabled the meditative tradition to integrate into the digital evaluation system and retain a place in India’s higher education digitalization. This approach, while meeting the quantifiable quality evaluation requirements of the digital age, has to some extent sustained the cultural foundation of educational tradition.

Conclusion

The digitalization of Indian higher education demonstrates that educational transformation is shaped not only by technological advancement but also by enduring cultural traditions. Guided by cultural gene theory, this study shows how the Dharma norm, Guru-Śāstra system, purity orientation, and cultivation metaphor influence the opportunities and tensions of digitalization. While digital technologies have expanded access and supported modernization, they have also generated conflicts between instrumental rationality and educational values, centralized governance and institutional autonomy, equality and hierarchy, and technological efficiency and educational essence. These interactions have produced both cultural adaptation and new forms of inequality, particularly through technological hierarchies and risks of cultural homogenization. The findings suggest that successful digital transformation requires balancing innovation with cultural continuity. For countries such as China, India’s experience highlights the importance of human-centered educational objectives, collaborative governance, equitable digital access, and the protection of cultural identity to ensure that technology enhances rather than undermines the fundamental mission of higher



education.

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