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Bridging the Ancient and the Modern: Role of Societies and Communities in Realizing Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam through Higher Education for Viksit Bharat @2047

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Abstract

The ancient Indian philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"the world is one family" offers a profound framework for reimagining higher education's role in national development. This paper examines how societies and communities can contribute to achieving the vision of Viksit Bharat (Developed India) @2047 by integrating this universal value into higher education approaches. Through a critical analysis of current issues in higher education, including the dominance of neoliberal values, the erosion of public good character, and the disconnect between education and community engagement, this study argues that a humanistic reorientation of higher education is essential. Drawing upon historical traditions of Asian learning, contemporary challenges, and emerging practices, the paper proposes a framework for community-integrated higher education that fosters global citizenship while remaining rooted in local realities. The findings suggest that sustainable development, social harmony, and genuine progress require educational approaches that balance material prosperity with universal human values, positioning higher education institutions as catalysts for both national development and global family consciousness.

Keywords: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, higher education, community engagement, Viksit Bharat, humanistic education, global family, sustainable development

Introduction

The vision of Viksit Bharat @2047 a developed India at the centenary of its independence coincides with a global moment of profound uncertainty and transformation. As the world grapples with climate change, geopolitical tensions, technological disruption, and widening inequalities, the ancient Indian ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam emerges not as a nostalgic relic but as a urgently relevant philosophical compass. This Sanskrit phrase, originating from

the Maha Upanishad, envisions the entire world as one family bound by mutual respect, sacrifice, and togetherness. Higher education institutions occupy a unique position in this transformative moment. They are simultaneously sites of knowledge production, cultural transmission, social critique, and human development. The question before educators, policymakers, and communities is fundamental: How can higher education contribute to building a developed India that is not merely economically prosperous but also socially harmonious, ecologically sustainable, and ethically grounded in the vision of a global family? This paper addresses this question by focusing on the role of societies and communities as envisioned in the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam framework. It argues that communities are not passive recipients of educational services but active participants in co-creating knowledge and values essential for both national development and global citizenship. The paper begins by tracing the philosophical foundations of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in Indian educational traditions, examines contemporary challenges facing higher education, analyzes the community-university interface, and proposes pathways for reimagining higher education as a collaborative endeavor between institutions and the communities they serve.

Literature Review

Philosophical Foundations of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in Education

The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam draws from deep wells of Indian philosophical thought. The phrase combines three Sanskrit words: *Vasudha* (earth/world), *iva* (like/as), and *kutumbakam* (extended family). Its earliest recorded appearance in the Maha Upanishad states: "अयं बन्धुरयं नेति गणना लघुचेतसाम्। उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्॥" The narrow-minded calculate the difference between 'this is mine' and 'this is another's'; to the broad-minded, the entire world is but one family."

The Bhagavad Gita reflects this spirit, articulating the ideal of seeing oneself in all beings and all beings in oneself. When this consciousness takes root, individual attitudes expand beyond narrow self-interest toward collective well-being. Peace, the Gita teaches, is a prerequisite for personal development, and family whether biological or global is the space where peace is cultivated.

Ancient Asian universities embodied these values. Institutions like Nalanda, Takshashila, and Vikramashila in India were not merely centers of scholarly excellence but communities where excellence, equity, justice, compassion, and harmony formed the underpinning values of learning. These institutions attracted students from across Asia, creating intellectual communities that transcended political boundaries while remaining embedded in local

contexts. Teachers were widely respected not because they transmitted employable skills but because they imparted values of universal significance to young minds.

The Neoliberal Turn and Its Discontents

The colonial period disrupted these indigenous educational traditions. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, the "beautiful tree" of Indian education was uprooted and replaced by systems designed to serve colonial interests. Post-independence, while nations sought to reclaim educational sovereignty, the deeper philosophical foundations of education-as-value-formation continued to erode.

The contemporary neoliberal phase has accelerated this transformation. Education, once understood as a public good and a global public good, is increasingly reconceptualized as a private commodity subject to market principles. The purpose of education has been narrowed to economic wealth creation, serving not even the nation-state but national and global capital markets. As scholar Jandhyala Tilak observes, "Few societies aim at creating a balance between materialistic values and intangible basic human values".

This shift has profound implications for how societies and communities relate to educational institutions. When education is framed primarily as private investment for individual economic returns, the sense of collective responsibility for education and education's responsibility to the collective diminishes. Communities become consumers rather than co-creators of education. The state's role is redefined as facilitator of markets rather than guarantor of educational opportunity and public good.

Community in Educational Thought: Asian Perspectives

Asian educational traditions have historically understood the individual, community, and cosmos as interconnected. Confucianism emphasized the cultivation of virtue through relationship; Vedic philosophy saw the individual's journey as inseparable from social and cosmic harmony. Education was not preparation for life but an integral dimension of living well in community.

This contrasts sharply with the hyper-individualism underlying much contemporary educational discourse. The Norwegian educational scholar Birgit Brock-Utne, in her examination of Ubuntu and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, highlights how indigenous knowledge systems worldwide emphasize relationality and interdependence. These systems were not "primitive" precursors to modern education but sophisticated philosophical frameworks that understood knowledge as embedded in community life, language, and ecological relationships.

The challenge for contemporary higher education is not to romanticize pre-colonial traditions but to engage them critically as resources for reimagining education's purpose. As Brock-Utne asks: "What was education like before colonialism?" and "Who should decide on what to study and what to do research on?". These questions point toward the need for educational approaches that are simultaneously globally engaged and locally accountable.

Research Work

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on analysis of secondary sources, including scholarly literature, policy documents, institutional mission statements, and conference proceedings. The research examines both the philosophical foundations of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and contemporary practices in higher education that exemplify or challenge community-engaged approaches. Case examples are drawn from Indian institutions that explicitly invoke Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam in their educational philosophy, with particular attention to the Symbiosis group of institutions as a illustrative model.

Analysis: The Community-University Interface in Contemporary India

Symbiosis: A Case Study in Institutionalizing Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

The Symbiosis group of institutions, established in 1971 by Dr. S.B. Mujumdar, offers a instructive example of how Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam can inform institutional practice. Founded in response to the difficulties faced by foreign students in India, Symbiosis explicitly adopted the motto "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" and the vision of "Promoting International Understanding through Quality Education"

.The institutional origin story is revealing: observing a Mauritian student with jaundice receiving food through a hostel window from a female compatriot (since ladies were not permitted in the boys' hostel), Dr. Mujumdar recognized that foreign students faced systemic challenges of accommodation, meals, medical care, and cultural integration -3. The response was not merely to provide services but to create an institutional culture where international students would find a "home away from home."

Today, Symbiosis hosts more than 40,000 students from over 85 countries. Its mission explicitly includes inculcating the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, fostering cross-cultural sensitization, promoting ethical and value-based learning, and instilling sensitivity toward community and environment. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, addressing the institution's golden jubilee in 2022, noted that Symbiosis offers a separate course on Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, keeping alive the tradition that "knowledge should be the medium to connect the entire world as one family".

Symbiosis demonstrates that institutionalizing a philosophical ideal requires more than rhetorical commitment. It demands: Creating physical and social spaces where diverse communities interact meaningfully
Developing curricula that explore the meaning and implications of global family consciousness
Building support systems that embody care for all members of the educational community
Extending the vision beyond campus to engage with wider society

Challenges in Community-University Engagement

Despite exemplary cases, significant barriers impede meaningful community-university engagement in pursuit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

Epistemic Hierarchies: Modern universities remain deeply shaped by Western academic models and traditions. Philip Altbach observes that "no Asian university is truly Asian in origin," and 21st-century universities are increasingly based on Western neoliberal values. This creates epistemic hierarchies where knowledge produced in communities indigenous knowledge, practical wisdom, local innovation is devalued relative to "scientific" or internationally validated knowledge.

Fragmentation of Knowledge: The disciplinary organization of universities mirrors the fragmentation of modern life. Humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences operate in silos, making it difficult to address the holistic challenges communities face. As Tilak argues, a humane society requires not only scientists and engineers but also philosophers, critical thinkers, and "organic intellectuals" who can understand the past, live in the present, and envision the future.

Market Pressures: The commodification of education creates incentives for institutions to prioritize revenue-generating activities over community engagement. Research is directed toward commercially valuable outcomes; curricula emphasize employability over citizenship. Communities become markets for educational services rather than partners in knowledge creation.

Policy-Practice Gaps: While national policies increasingly acknowledge the importance of community engagement the National Education Policy 2020 in India emphasizes holistic and multidisciplinary education with strong community connections—implementation lags. Institutional incentives, accreditation criteria, and funding mechanisms often fail to reward meaningful community engagement.

Community as Co-Educator: Expanding the Vasudhaiva Framework

Realizing Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam through higher education requires reconceptualizing communities not as beneficiaries but as co-educators. This means:

Recognizing Multiple Knowledge Systems: Communities possess knowledge essential for addressing contemporary challenges from sustainable agriculture to mental health, from conflict resolution to ecological stewardship. Higher education institutions must create mechanisms for this knowledge to enter curricula and research agendas.

Embedding Students in Community Life: Learning experiences that immerse students in diverse communities urban and rural, affluent and marginalized, Indian and international develop the cross-cultural sensitivity essential for global family consciousness. Service-learning, community-based research, and international exchanges are not add-ons but core educational strategies.

Co-Creating Research Agendas: Community-defined problems should shape research priorities. When universities research with communities rather than on communities, knowledge production becomes democratized and more responsive to actual needs.

Extending the "Family" Ethos: The family metaphor implies mutual care, responsibility, and intergenerational learning. Higher education institutions can embody this by creating lifelong learning relationships with alumni, hosting intergenerational programs, and supporting community-defined development initiatives.

The Viksit Bharat @2047 Framework

The vision of Viksit Bharat @2047 provides a compelling context for reimagining higher education's community role. Prime Minister Modi's address at Symbiosis suggested concrete ways institutions can align with national development goals while embodying Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam :

Annual Institutional Themes: Each year, institutions could adopt a theme of national importance global warming, climate change impacts on coastal areas, border area development and engage the entire community in studying, researching, and creating awareness about it. This transforms abstract national goals into lived educational experiences.

Language Learning for National Integration: Learning words and phrases from other Indian languages fosters the spirit of "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat" (One India, Best India), which the Prime Minister identified as essential for realizing Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

Digitizing Freedom Movement Heritage: Engaging students in preserving and digitizing aspects of India's freedom movement connects them to the nation's foundational values while developing research skills.

Technology for Community Problems: Encouraging students to develop innovations addressing local challenges—from agricultural technology to healthcare delivery—channels technical education toward community benefit.

Conclusion

The journey toward Viksit Bharat @2047 requires more than economic growth and technological advancement. It demands the cultivation of citizens who understand themselves as members of multiple, nested communities—local, national, and global—and who possess the values, skills, and dispositions to contribute to the well-being of all. Higher education institutions, as sites where young people encounter diverse perspectives and develop their capacities for critical thinking and ethical action, are central to this transformative project. The philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam offers a framework for reimagining higher education that is simultaneously ancient and urgently contemporary. It challenges the narrow economism that has reduced education to job training and instead insists on education as formation of the whole person for life in community. It refuses the false choice between national development and global citizenship, recognizing that authentic patriotism and genuine internationalism are complementary, not contradictory. For societies and communities, this vision implies both rights and responsibilities. Communities have the right to expect that higher education institutions serve their needs, respect their knowledge, and prepare young people to contribute to community well-being. But communities also have the responsibility to engage with universities as partners, to articulate their needs and aspirations, to share their wisdom, and to hold institutions accountable to the highest values. The challenges are formidable: neoliberal ideologies that commodity education, institutional inertia that resists change, epistemic hierarchies that devalue local knowledge, and resource constraints that limit possibilities. Yet the examples of institutions like Symbiosis demonstrate that another path is possible. When higher education embraces its role in cultivating global family consciousness, it becomes not merely an instrument for individual advancement but a catalyst for the kind of humane, sustainable, and just society that Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam envisions. As India moves toward 2047, the question is not whether higher education will contribute to national development—it inevitably will—but what kind of development and for whom. The answer depends on whether we have the wisdom to recover and reimagine the ancient insight that the world is, indeed, one family

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