



Revisiting Tarabai Modak's Educational Philosophy and Its Relevance to Contemporary Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Tarabai Modak was an important Indian educationist who made a significant contribution to early childhood education, particularly for children from rural and tribal communities. She believed that young children learn better through play, activities, experiences and interaction with their surroundings. This paper examines Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy and explores its relevance to contemporary early childhood education. The study follows a qualitative, descriptive and analytical approach based on secondary sources, including books, research articles, educational documents and policy papers. The discussion focuses on her life and educational contributions, major aspects of her educational philosophy, her approach to early childhood education, her contribution to rural and tribal education, and the relevance of her ideas in contemporary education and the context of NEP 2020. The study finds that several of her educational ideas remain relevant in the present context. Her emphasis on child-centred learning, play, activity, experience, local resources, community participation and holistic development has meaningful connections with contemporary approaches to early childhood education. Her work also provides useful insights into inclusive and context-sensitive educational practices. The

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paper concludes that revisiting Tarabai Modak's educational vision can contribute to developing joyful, accessible and child-sensitive learning environments during the Foundational Stage.

Introduction

Early childhood is a significant period in human life because the experiences children receive during the early years influence their physical, cognitive, emotional, social and language development. Education during this stage is therefore not limited to preparing children for formal schooling. It should provide opportunities for children to play, explore, communicate, create and develop through meaningful experiences. In recent years, early childhood education has received greater attention in educational policy and practice, particularly because of the growing understanding of the importance of the Foundational Stage.

The idea of providing education according to the needs and development of children is not completely new. In India, several educationists contributed to the development of child-centred and activity-based approaches long before these ideas became widely discussed in contemporary educational policy. Among them, Tarabai Modak holds a significant position. She was one of the pioneers of early childhood education in India and worked extensively to make preschool education accessible to children from different social and economic backgrounds. Her educational work was particularly important in rural and tribal areas, where access to formal educational facilities was often limited.

Tarabai Modak's educational thinking was influenced by progressive ideas of early childhood education, including Montessori principles. However, she did not simply reproduce these ideas in the Indian context. She attempted to adapt them according to the needs and conditions of Indian children. Her association with Gijubhai Badheka also influenced the development of her educational ideas. Together with other educationists, she contributed to the growth of an approach to preschool education that gave importance to the child's natural development, activity, freedom and joyful learning. The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage recognises Tarabai Modak as one of the early pioneers of child-centred early childhood education in modern India. (NCERT, 2022)

One of the most important contributions of Tarabai Modak was her work in developing and expanding the Balwadi system. She believed that preschool education should not be restricted to urban areas or children from economically privileged families. She experimented with different forms of preschool education that could reach children in rural and disadvantaged communities. Her work included the development of



Balwadis and Angan Balwadis, where children could learn in familiar surroundings through play, activities, stories, movement and simple learning materials. The use of locally available and low-cost materials was an important feature of her approach.

Her educational work became particularly significant when she started working with rural and tribal communities. She understood that children's educational needs are closely connected with their family, community, culture and everyday environment. Therefore, educational practices should be flexible enough to respond to local conditions. Her experiments at Bordi and later at Kosbad reflected this understanding. She also developed innovative approaches such as the Kuranshala or Meadow School, which attempted to provide education to children whose daily circumstances made regular attendance at conventional schools difficult. Such experiments demonstrate her concern for accessibility, flexibility and inclusion in education.

Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy also gave importance to learning through activity and experience. Instead of making young children dependent mainly on textbooks and verbal instruction, she encouraged the use of games, movement, songs, stories, creative activities and objects from the local environment. Such an approach allowed children to participate actively in learning. It also showed that effective early childhood education does not always require expensive resources. Meaningful learning experiences can be created through simple materials when teachers understand the developmental needs of children

The relevance of these ideas has become more visible in the present educational context. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 gives special importance to the Foundational Stage and recommends play-based, activity-based and experiential learning for young children. It also emphasises holistic development and the need to provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences. (Ministry of Education, 2020) The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 further emphasises the importance of children's home language, local context, play, interaction and meaningful experiences in early learning. (NCERT, 2022)

These developments create an important context for revisiting Tarabai Modak's educational ideas. Several principles found in her work—such as child-centred learning, play, activity, experience, local resources, community participation and sensitivity to the needs of rural and tribal children—have meaningful connections with contemporary approaches to early childhood education. At the same time, her ideas need to be understood within their historical context and adapted rather than copied directly into present educational practice.

Therefore, the present paper attempts to examine Tarabai Modak's life and educational contributions and analyse the major facets of her educational philosophy. It further explores her approach to rural and tribal education and examines the relevance of her ideas to contemporary early childhood education, particularly in the context of NEP 2020. Revisiting her contribution can help highlight the value of indigenous educational thought and provide useful insights for developing accessible, inclusive, joyful and child-centred early childhood education in India.

Review of Related Literature

Tarabai Modak occupies an important place in the history of early childhood education in India. Her educational work was mainly concerned with making preschool education meaningful, accessible and suitable for Indian children, particularly those living in rural and tribal communities. Existing literature on her work mainly discusses her contribution to preschool education, Balwadi, Angan Balwadi, activity-based learning, low-cost teaching materials and education for disadvantaged children. The available studies also indicate that her educational ideas have several points of connection with contemporary approaches to early childhood education.

A major source on the history of early childhood education in India presents Tarabai Modak as one of the important pioneers who helped develop an indigenous approach to preschool education. The literature notes that she worked with Gijubhai Badheka and was influenced by Montessori principles, but attempted to adapt educational ideas to Indian social and economic conditions. Her work at Bordi and later at Kosbad focused particularly on children from rural and tribal communities. The development of Balwadis and Angan Balwadis was an important part of this effort. The use of locally available materials and activities made preschool education more practical and less expensive.

The literature further highlights the importance of Tarabai Modak's Balwadi model. She developed different forms of preschool centres according to the needs of children and their communities. Central Balwadis provided a more organised preschool environment, whereas Angan Balwadis were conducted close to children's homes, often in courtyards or other familiar spaces. This approach reduced the distance between the school and the child's everyday life. Activities included games, language development, creative work, movement and simple practical experiences. The use of locally available materials was also encouraged, allowing teachers to prepare learning materials without depending on expensive equipment.

Another important area of literature focuses on Tarabai Modak's work with rural and tribal children. Her work at Bordi and Kosbad shows that she did not consider preschool education as something meant only for



children from urban or economically privileged families. Instead, she tried to develop educational models that could work within the actual conditions of rural and tribal communities. Her Meadow School or Kuranshala was another important experiment. It was developed for children who could not regularly attend school because they were involved in grazing cattle and other activities. Instead of forcing these children to follow a fixed school routine, education was taken to their natural surroundings. This reflected a flexible and context-sensitive approach to education.

The literature also draws attention to the learning-by-doing approach associated with Tarabai Modak. Her educational practices involved games, movement, observation, creative activities and the use of objects available in the local environment. Such practices provided children with opportunities to learn through direct experience rather than depending only on verbal instruction. The use of stones, seeds, soil, shells, bamboo pieces and other simple objects for learning concepts shows her attempt to connect education with children's everyday experiences. This aspect of her work has relevance for present discussions on activity-based and experiential learning.

The role of community and parents is another important aspect found in the available literature. Since many of the Balwadis were organised close to children's homes, education became connected with the community. Teachers and local people could participate in the preparation of learning materials and in creating suitable learning spaces. This approach is significant because it suggests that early childhood education does not necessarily depend on highly formalised infrastructure. Local participation and the use of familiar surroundings can also support children's learning.

Some educational literature places Tarabai Modak within the broader development of Indian early childhood education. Her work, along with that of other educationists, contributed to the growth of indigenous preschool practices in India. The Nutan Bal Shikshan Sangh, teacher training initiatives, educational publications and Balwadi movement helped spread ideas about preschool education beyond individual institutions. Her work therefore needs to be understood not only as an individual educational experiment but also as part of a wider movement for the development of early childhood education in India.

Recent studies have attempted to revisit Tarabai Modak's contribution from a historical perspective. Sarode's study describes her educational initiatives as practical and innovative, particularly because they combined low-cost materials, activity-based learning and community participation. The study also highlights her experiments in Bordi and Kosbad and discusses their continuing relevance for rural and tribal children.



A more recent historical analysis by Uprit and Chand examines Tarabai Modak's educational vision and the pedagogical ideas associated with her Balwadi model. The study places her work within the historical development of early childhood education and highlights the importance of indigenous learning and sustainable educational practices. It also attempts to connect her educational ideas with contemporary educational concerns, including NEP 2020.

The relationship between Tarabai Modak's ideas and contemporary early childhood education can therefore be understood through several common themes. Her emphasis on play, activity, experience, local materials, child participation and flexible learning environments is consistent with many present-day approaches to early childhood education. Her work also provides an important example of how educational methods can be adapted to the social and economic conditions of learners rather than applying a single model to all children.

The NEP 2020 has further increased the importance of such ideas in the Indian educational context. The policy gives special attention to the Foundational Stage and recommends play-based, activity-based and experiential learning. It also emphasises holistic development and recognises the importance of learning in the child's familiar environment and language. These principles create a meaningful area for examining the continuing relevance of Tarabai Modak's educational ideas. However, the similarities should be understood as points of connection rather than evidence that NEP 2020 directly adopted her philosophy.

Research Gap

The review of available literature indicates that Tarabai Modak's contribution to Indian preschool education has been discussed in a number of educational and historical sources. Most of these works focus on her life, Balwadi movement, work with rural and tribal children, low-cost teaching materials and learning-by-doing approach. Recent studies have also started to examine the contemporary relevance of her educational ideas.

However, the available literature remains relatively limited in providing a comprehensive analysis of Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy from the perspective of contemporary child-centred early childhood education. Much of the existing discussion is historical or descriptive and gives greater attention to her contribution than to a systematic examination of how different aspects of her educational philosophy relate to present educational practices. There is also scope for bringing together her work on child-centred learning, rural and tribal education, local materials, community participation and experiential learning within a single analytical framework.



Therefore, the present study attempts to address this gap by examining Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy and exploring its relevance to contemporary early childhood education. Particular attention is given to her contribution to rural and tribal education and to the possible connections between her educational ideas and the principles of NEP 2020. The study thus seeks to revisit her educational contribution not only as an important part of Indian educational history but also as a source of ideas that may remain meaningful for present-day early childhood education.

Rationale of the Study

Early childhood is an important stage of human development because the experiences children receive during these years influence their later learning and development. In recent years, greater attention has been given to play-based, activity-based and child-centred approaches in early childhood education. However, developing suitable early childhood education practices remains a challenge, particularly in rural and tribal communities where educational resources and facilities may be limited. In this context, the educational contribution of Tarabai Modak deserves careful attention.

Tarabai Modak was one of the important pioneers of early childhood education in India. She worked to make preschool education accessible and meaningful for children from different social and economic backgrounds. Her experiments with Balwadis, Angan Balwadis and other flexible learning arrangements showed that early childhood education could be developed by using local resources and by connecting learning with children's everyday surroundings. Her work with rural and tribal communities also reflected the importance of adapting educational practices to local needs.

The present educational context gives further importance to examining her ideas. NEP 2020 places strong emphasis on the Foundational Stage and recommends play-based, activity-based and experiential learning along with holistic development. Several of these principles have meaningful connections with Tarabai Modak's educational approach. (Ministry of Education, 2020; NCERT, 2022)

Therefore, there is a need to revisit Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy and examine its relevance to contemporary early childhood education. Such an examination can provide useful insights into child-centred learning, the use of local resources, community participation and educational practices for rural and tribal children. The study may also help teachers, teacher educators, curriculum planners and researchers understand how indigenous educational ideas can contribute to present-day early childhood education.

Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the life and educational contributions of Tarabai Modak in the field of early childhood education.
2. To analyse the major facets of Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy and their contribution to child-centred early childhood education.
3. To explore Tarabai Modak's approach to rural and tribal education and its significance for inclusive early childhood education.
4. To examine the relevance of Tarabai Modak's educational ideas in contemporary early childhood education, particularly in the context of NEP 2020.

Methodology

The present study follows a qualitative, descriptive and analytical approach. It is based mainly on secondary sources related to Tarabai Modak, early childhood education, child-centred education and NEP 2020. Relevant books, research articles, educational documents and institutional publications were reviewed to understand her educational ideas and contributions. The collected information was analysed thematically under major areas such as her educational philosophy, early childhood education, rural and tribal education, and contemporary relevance. The study also compares selected ideas of Tarabai Modak with current approaches to early childhood education and the principles of NEP 2020. No primary data were collected for the study.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Tarabai Modak's Life and Educational Contribution

Tarabai Modak (1892–1973) was one of the important pioneers of early childhood education in India. She devoted much of her work to the education of young children and particularly focused on making preschool education accessible to children from rural and disadvantaged communities. Her educational contribution was important because she tried to develop methods that were suitable for Indian social and cultural conditions rather than depending completely on formal and rigid models of schooling.

Tarabai Modak was associated with Gijubhai Badheka and was influenced by progressive approaches to early childhood education, including Montessori ideas. However, she did not simply copy these ideas. She tried to adapt them to the needs of Indian children and local communities. Her work gave importance to the



child's natural development, freedom, activity and joyful learning. The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage recognises Tarabai Modak among the pioneers who contributed to the development of child-centred early childhood education in India. (NCERT, 2022)

One of her major contributions was the development and expansion of the Balwadi system. She believed that preschool education should reach children beyond urban and economically privileged groups. Her experiments at Bordi and later at Kosbad helped her develop educational practices for rural and tribal children. She also promoted flexible forms of preschool education, including Angan Balwadis, which brought learning closer to children's homes and communities.

Another important feature of her contribution was the use of simple and locally available materials. She understood that rural and tribal communities might not have access to expensive educational equipment. Therefore, she encouraged teachers to use materials from the local environment for learning activities. Her approach showed that meaningful early childhood education could be organised even with limited resources.

Her work with rural and tribal communities was particularly significant. She recognised that children's education is closely related to their family, community and surroundings. Her educational experiments therefore attempted to make learning more accessible, flexible and connected with everyday life. In this sense, Tarabai Modak's contribution was not limited to preschool teaching; it also represented an effort to develop an Indian and context-sensitive approach to early childhood education.

2. Major Facets of Tarabai Modak's Educational Philosophy

The educational philosophy of Tarabai Modak can be understood through several important principles. The first and most important principle was child-centred education. She believed that education should respond to the needs, interests and developmental level of the child. The child should not remain a passive receiver of information. Instead, children should receive opportunities to participate, explore and learn through their own experiences.

A second important feature was learning through play and activity. Tarabai gave importance to games, songs, stories, movement, creative activities and practical experiences. These activities made learning more natural and enjoyable for young children. Her approach recognised that early childhood is different from later stages of education and therefore requires developmentally appropriate methods.



Another important aspect was learning through experience. Instead of depending mainly on textbooks or verbal instruction, children could learn by observing, touching, handling and exploring objects around them. This approach also supported the development of curiosity, creativity and independence.

Tarabai also emphasised the use of local and low-cost materials. She believed that lack of expensive teaching-learning materials should not prevent children from receiving quality education. Objects available in the local environment could be used creatively for different learning activities. This principle remains useful in rural and resource-limited settings.

Her philosophy also reflected the importance of freedom and self-activity. Young children need opportunities to act, make choices and express themselves. A supportive learning environment can help children develop confidence and independence. At the same time, the teacher has an important role in creating suitable activities and guiding children without unnecessary control.

Another important feature was context-sensitive education. Tarabai understood that children come from different social and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the same educational model may not work equally well everywhere. Her work with rural and tribal children reflected her belief that education should be connected with local life and surroundings. Historical studies of her work also highlight her efforts to adapt Montessori-influenced ideas to Indian conditions. (Debs, 2022; Tschurenev, 2021)

Thus, her educational philosophy combined child-centredness, activity, play, experience, freedom, local resources and sensitivity to the social environment. These principles form an important part of her contribution to Indian early childhood education.

3. Tarabai Modak and Child-Centred Early Childhood Education

Tarabai Modak made a significant contribution to the development of child-centred early childhood education in India. She moved away from an approach in which young children were expected to sit quietly and receive formal instruction. Instead, she supported an environment where children could learn through play, activity, interaction and experience.

Her Balwadi model reflected this approach. The purpose was not simply to provide children with an early version of formal schooling. It was to create an environment where children could develop through meaningful activities. Games, songs, stories, movement, creative work and simple practical activities could support language, social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.



Her use of Angan Balwadis was also significant because it brought preschool education closer to children's everyday surroundings. This made early childhood education more accessible, particularly for children who might face difficulties in attending formal preschool centres. The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage identifies community-based early childhood education as an important part of Tarabai Modak's contribution. (NCERT, 2022)

Her approach also recognised the importance of the child's existing experiences. Children do not enter an educational setting without prior knowledge. They already have experiences from their family, community and environment. Learning becomes more meaningful when teachers connect new experiences with what children already know.

Tarabai's child-centred approach therefore has continuing relevance. It suggests that early childhood education should focus not only on what the teacher wants to teach but also on how young children learn and develop. This principle is consistent with contemporary understanding of developmentally appropriate early childhood education.

4. Tarabai Modak's Contribution to Rural and Tribal Education

One of the most distinctive aspects of Tarabai Modak's work was her attention to rural and tribal children. She understood that educational practices developed for urban settings could not always be applied directly to rural and tribal communities. Local living conditions, culture, family responsibilities and available resources needed to be considered.

Her work at Bordi and later at Kosbad reflected this approach. She experimented with educational models that could function within rural and tribal settings. Her work showed that education could be organised around the realities of children's lives rather than requiring every child to adjust to a rigid institutional system.

The Kuranshala or Meadow School was one example of such flexibility. It attempted to reach children whose daily circumstances made regular attendance at a conventional school difficult. Such experiments reflected her belief that educational opportunities should be brought closer to children who were otherwise likely to remain excluded.

The use of local materials was another important contribution. Natural and easily available materials could be used to create teaching-learning activities. This reduced dependence on costly resources and allowed



children to learn from their own surroundings. Her approach therefore had both pedagogical and practical value.

Tarabai also recognised the importance of community participation. Education in rural and tribal areas cannot always be separated from family and community life. Parents and community members can support children's learning and help create a more suitable educational environment. Her work therefore provides an early example of community-oriented early childhood education in India. Recent research also highlights the innovative nature of her work in rural and tribal settings and her use of low-cost, activity-based methods. (Sarode, 2025; Uprit & Chand, 2026)

Her contribution is therefore important from the perspective of inclusion. It demonstrates that providing access to education is not enough; educational methods and environments should also respond to the needs of different groups of children.

5. Relevance in Contemporary Education and the Context of NEP 2020

Several principles of Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy remain relevant to contemporary early childhood education. Her emphasis on play, activity, experience, child participation and holistic development has strong connections with present approaches to the Foundational Stage.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 gives special importance to early childhood care and education and places the Foundational Stage at the centre of school education. It recommends play-based, activity-based and experiential learning for young children and emphasises their holistic development. (Ministry of Education, 2020)

These ideas have meaningful similarities with Tarabai Modak's educational approach. Her emphasis on learning through play and activities reflects the present understanding that young children learn best through active engagement. Similarly, her use of local materials and the surrounding environment connects with the contemporary emphasis on experiential and contextual learning.

The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022 also emphasises play, interaction, children's home language, local context and meaningful experiences. These principles create a clear connection with Tarabai Modak's emphasis on the child's environment and community. (NCERT, 2022)

Her work is also relevant to inclusive education. Contemporary education needs to respond to children from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Tarabai's work with rural and tribal communities



demonstrates the importance of adapting educational practices according to local needs rather than using one rigid model for all children.

The use of low-cost and locally available materials also remains relevant. Many schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas, may face limitations in educational resources. Tarabai's approach shows that teachers can create meaningful learning experiences through creativity and careful use of the local environment.

At the same time, her ideas should not be copied mechanically into present-day education. Educational needs, technology and knowledge about child development have changed over time. The value of her contribution lies in the principles behind her work. These principles can be adapted to present conditions while maintaining their focus on the child, activity, experience, inclusion and community.

Overall, the analysis shows that Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy has continuing relevance. Her work provides an important Indian perspective on child-centred early childhood education and offers useful insights into play-based learning, local resources, community participation and inclusive practices. Her educational vision also connects meaningfully with several principles of NEP 2020 and the NCF-FS 2022. Revisiting her contribution can therefore help educators develop early childhood learning environments that are more joyful, accessible, flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of Indian children.

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant because it brings attention to the educational contribution of Tarabai Modak, particularly in the field of early childhood education. Her work provides an important Indian perspective on how education for young children can be made child-centred, meaningful and accessible. Revisiting her ideas is useful at a time when early childhood education has received greater importance in Indian educational policy.

The study is particularly relevant for early childhood educators and teachers. Tarabai Modak's emphasis on play, activity, experience and the use of local materials can provide practical ideas for creating engaging learning experiences for young children. Her approach also reminds teachers to consider children's individual needs and their social and cultural backgrounds.

The study is also significant for rural and tribal education. Tarabai's experiments show how educational practices can be adapted to local conditions and how community participation can support early childhood education. Her use of low-cost and locally available materials may be useful in areas where educational resources are limited.



For teacher educators and curriculum planners, the study provides an opportunity to understand the relevance of indigenous educational ideas in contemporary early childhood education. It also draws attention to the similarities between Tarabai Modak's educational vision and several principles emphasised in NEP 2020, particularly play-based, activity-based, experiential and holistic learning. (Ministry of Education, 2020; NCERT, 2022)

Finally, the study may encourage researchers to explore the contributions of Indian educationists in greater depth and to examine how historical educational ideas can inform present educational practices. In this way, the study contributes to a broader understanding of child-centred and context-sensitive early childhood education in India.

Conclusion

Tarabai Modak occupies an important place in the development of early childhood education in India. Her educational work was guided by a clear concern for the needs, interests and development of young children. Instead of depending mainly on formal and rigid methods, she gave importance to play, activity, experience, freedom and learning through the child's surroundings. Her work also showed that meaningful education could be provided through simple and locally available resources.

One of the most valuable aspects of her contribution was her attention to children from rural and tribal communities. Through her experiments with Balwadis, Angan Balwadis and other flexible forms of education, she tried to make early childhood education more accessible to children who were often outside the reach of formal educational institutions. Her approach also highlighted the importance of community participation and adapting educational practices to local conditions.

The discussion in the present study shows that several of Tarabai Modak's ideas remain relevant in contemporary early childhood education. Her emphasis on child-centred learning, activity, experience, local resources and holistic development connects with many current approaches to early childhood education. There are also meaningful similarities between her educational vision and the principles of NEP 2020, particularly in relation to play-based, activity-based and experiential learning at the Foundational Stage. (Ministry of Education, 2020; NCERT, 2022)

However, her educational ideas should not be applied mechanically in the present context. Rather, the basic principles behind her work can be understood and adapted according to current educational needs. Her contribution reminds us that effective early childhood education should be responsive to children's developmental needs as well as their social and cultural surroundings.



In conclusion, revisiting Tarabai Modak's educational philosophy provides useful insights for developing accessible, joyful, inclusive and child-sensitive early childhood education in India. Her work remains valuable not only as a part of Indian educational history but also as a source of ideas for strengthening contemporary practices in the Foundational Stage.

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