

## SDG 4 AND INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: A VIVEKA BASED ANALYSIS

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### Abstract:

Contemporary approaches to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasize access, inclusivity, equity, and measurable learning outcomes. The focus is not so much on the ethical and epistemic capacities required to reduce inequality and promote lifelong learning. Drawing on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), this paper argues that the idea of *dharma* offers a normative framework to operationalize sustainability in education. Central to this is the concept of *viveka* (discernment) which is repeatedly dealt with in Hindu textual traditions. Using hermeneutical textual analysis of selected Hindu sources, the paper contextualizes *viveka* in terms of broader educational relevance. Our analysis shows that *viveka*, when interpreted as cultivated judgment, aligns closely with SDG 4, particularly Target 4.7. To illustrate this practically, we show how the idea of *viveka* can be extended to the realm of educational diplomacy. The paper concludes that integrating *viveka* into education reframes learning as a lifelong process of sustaining human dignity and responsible action.

**Keywords:** *Viveka, SDG 4, Sustainable Development, Educational Diplomacy*

### Introduction:

Contemporary sustainability discourse recognizes that purely technocratic or economic models are insufficient to address long-term human and ecological well-being (Sachs, 2015;

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Sunny et al., 2024). In this regard, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intended to provide a comprehensive framework for addressing interconnected challenges related to poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. SDG 4 focuses on education as means of sustainable development. It calls for inclusive education and the promotion of lifelong learning.

Within SDG 4, Target 4.7 is particularly important in sustaining inclusive societies. It frames education as not merely a job-oriented skill, but as the cultivation of informed and responsible actors (Unterhalter, 2019). It includes, among other things, education for human rights, gender equality, and cultural diversity. It positions education as a normative project rather than a purely instrumental one. However, SDG 4 is often understood in terms of access and skills. Less attention is paid to the ethical and epistemic capacities to engage with sustainability (Pham Xuan & Håkansson Lindqvist, 2025). More broadly speaking, there is limited focus on non-Western epistemologies that stress qualities like judgment, discernment, restraint, and responsibility as central to learning.

At the same time, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), have for millennia offered indigenous civilizational frameworks that integrate ethics, education, sustainability, and social continuity. In the Hindu tradition, *dharma*, derived from the root *dhr* (to sustain), functions as a normative principle governing inter-generational continuity and social well-being. A key concept in dharmic traditions is *viveka* (discernment), which underpins moral judgment and responsible action (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016). This paper situates *viveka* as a foundational educational principle relevant to SDG 4’s emphasis on inclusive and lifelong learning, and particularly Target 4.7 and the role of cultivated judgment and reflective agency.

### Literature Review:

*Viveka* occupies a central place within Indian Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a foundational faculty concerned with judgment, and appropriate action. Upanishadic literature frames *viveka* in practical terms through the distinction between *śreyas* (the beneficial) and *preyas* (the pleasurable) as seen in the Kathopanishad 1.2.1–2. In the classical darshanas, this idea is discussed in details. In Advaita Vedanta, for example, *Viveka*-s like *nitya–anitya–vastu–viveka* or *drg–dṛśya–viveka* function as necessary disciplines integrating epistemic

clarity with ethical restraint (Swami Advayananda, 2024; Swami Tejomayananda, 2019). *Viveka* in contemporary discourse may be seen as an epistemic virtue that links knowledge and ethics. This is distinct from instrumental models of learning that prioritize information or skills alone (Mohanty, 2000).

### **Methodology:**

The study employs hermeneutical textual analysis, combining philological examination and contextual exegesis of selected Hindu textual sources. Classical references are analyzed to extract both the general ethical meaning of *viveka*. These insights are then qualitatively understood in terms of SDG 4 concepts and indicators.

### **Results:**

Hermeneutical textual analysis of classical Hindu texts reveal two major approaches to *viveka* in terms of educational sustainability.

### **Viveka as an educational competency:**

When *viveka* is treated in its general sense of discernment and judgment, it functions as the educational capacity to sift claims and weigh consequences. The Kathopanishad presents a classic discernment problem: *śreyas* (the good, beneficial) and *preyas* (the pleasant, immediately gratifying) both approach the human being; the wise person discriminates and chooses *śreyas* (Swami Chinmayananda, 2020). Read educationally, this is a compact theory of sustainable agency: *viveka* trains learners to prefer the long-term, dignity-preserving, socially beneficial choice over impulse, peer pressure, and consumerist default. It enables one to choose ethically and socially sustaining option. This aligns directly with SDG Target 4.7, which explicitly calls for learners to acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote “sustainable development,” including “human rights” and “gender equality.” In this framing, *viveka* becomes the missing link between “knowing about” rights/sustainability and acting with rights-respecting judgment in real situations. This is precisely the kind of ethical capacity SDG 4.7 presupposes but does not fully theorize.

### **Viveka supports lifelong formation and responsible work:**

SDG 4 also emphasizes lifelong learning opportunities. The textual analysis indicates that *viveka* is inherently lifelong: discernment is not a one-time skill but an ongoing discipline applied to consumption, relationships, speech, employment, civic life, and the environment. Gita 2.50 frames *yoga* as *karmasu kauśalam*—skillfulness in action/work. In SDG 4 terms, this helps widen the meaning of “skills for work” (often treated narrowly as employability) into competent, conscientious action: doing one’s role with care, minimizing harm, resisting corruption, and thinking in systems—an educational foundation for sustainable institutions.

### **Discussion:**

SDG 4 is often pursued via infrastructure, enrollment, and learning outcomes. Although necessary, these are not sufficient to realize its full potential. *Viveka* can however add a capability layer: it strengthens learners’ ability to resist misinformation and emotion-driven escalation. The *Bhagavad Gita* (2.63) explicitly describes this chain: anger → delusion → memory-confusion → destruction of intellect → ruin. Interpreted as an educational insight, this is a theory of how classrooms and societies become unsustainable. When judgment is clouded, learners become easier to polarize or mobilize into harmful action. A *viveka*-oriented pedagogy based on reflection, self-regulation, checking impulses, and evaluating evidence directly supports SDG 4’s dignity-and-equality aims by reducing the conditions under which exclusion flourish.

One must not be under the impression that *viveka* is a standalone idea without practical merits. One area where it can, and does to some extent, play an important role is educational diplomacy, and IKS is increasingly being used as an ethical impetus. Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* remains a text where *realpolitik* is inseparably embedded within a normative framework of judgment and restraint. Strategic action is guided by prudential discernment rather than unprincipled expediency (Chati et al., 2018; Rangarajan, 1992). In other words, diplomacy meets and is seamlessly assimilated in the normative idea of diplomatic *viveka* or ‘conscience’. As Lebow pointed out that “ethical foreign policies, consistent with generally accepted ethical norms, are more likely to succeed and those at odds with them are more likely to fail in international relations” (Lebow, 2020). It is to be

noted here that, India has been able to sustain the notions of cultural diplomacy in the recent past through the export of education systems based on IKS and the use of the soft power in educational systems: “India’s educational collaboration with BIMSETC nations, using soft power diplomacy, can strengthen relations and help address south Asia’s human resource deficit” (Nandy & Naha, 2022).

This is a reality now, and is helping India counter the avalanche of soft power influence through the mass media and educational imports of South east Asian and east Asian countries like Vietnam, China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. What is interesting to note is the rapid increase of Indian cultural and educational exports which in turn has had a positive impact on India’s international diplomatic stance. As is pointed out by Song Tang, “India’s scholarship diplomacy serve as a countermeasure to China’s growing influence in South Asia by exporting cultural values, promoting cultural exchange, and strengthening geographical ties with neighboring countries” (Tang, 2021).

### **Limitations and Future Research:**

The study has some limitations. This study is primarily conceptual and text-based. It draws on selective Hindu textual sources to showcase the educational relevance of *viveka*. It does not empirically test pedagogical interventions or learning outcomes. Future research may extend this work through empirical studies examining how *viveka*-based pedagogies can influence ethical reasoning and sustainability-oriented decision-making.

### **Conclusion:**

In this paper we argue that *dharma*, understood as that which sustains a civilized society, offers a civilizational perspective on sustainability in which education plays a central role. By foregrounding *viveka* as a core educational faculty, the study demonstrates how IKS can meaningfully inform SDG 4, especially Target 4.7. At the same time, it can also extend its ethical depth. Reframing education as the cultivation of discernment positions learning not merely as a means to economic ends, but as a lifelong process. We argue that *viveka* can also form a core foundation of education diplomacy guided by widespread implementations of IKS. While IKS has existed for centuries, nay millennia perhaps, one cannot deny that the use of IKS

in defining diplomatic conscience can lead to the use of soft power diplomacy on India's end though academia and cultural exports. This in turn points out to the need how IKS integration in education diplomacy in India, as it invokes within itself the elements of diplomatic balance and sustainability.

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