

Research Paper

Examining the Crisis of Happiness in Professional Programs: A Potential Solution for the Wellbeing of Students Enrolled in Professional Programs in India

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ABSTRACT

Current state of affairs in Indian education, which is characterized by a rigid examination-focused approach that prioritizes cognitive learning over emotional wellbeing. This approach, coupled with societal pressures and financial disparities, contributes to a significant mental health burden among students specially in professional programmes. The study examines various initiatives and policies, such as the Happiness Curriculum, aimed at integrating positive education into the curriculum. It also delves into the philosophical underpinnings of happiness, drawing from Indian philosophy, particularly the concept of "Madhyastha Darshan," which emphasizes the role of human conduct and ethics in achieving true happiness. The paper underscores the importance of a holistic approach to education that goes beyond academic achievements to nurture the emotional, social, and ethical development of students. It argues that promoting happiness in education is not just about individual wellbeing but also about creating a more just and equitable society. By addressing the root causes of unhappiness and inequality, education can become a powerful tool for social transformation and collective wellbeing.

Keywords: *Happiness, wellbeing, madhyastha darshan, students in professional programme*

Youth Issues and Importance of Happiness Education in India

The prevailing social and economic inequalities in our society have created a situation where not every student receives equal opportunities for upbringing, raising concerns about the future they will step into. The significant income disparities have had an adverse impact on students' mental wellbeing (Thomson et al., 2018). In addition to the challenges of learning and achievement students come to educational institutions with stressors arising from many sources including family system disturbance, peer interaction conflicts, socio cultural components and vulnerabilities to physical and mental health risk factors (Patel et. al., 2018; Pienyu et al., 2024). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a mental health crisis among students in different stages in India due to lockdown restrictions, overwhelming numbers of COVID-19 cases, financial difficulty, etc. (Chaudhary at el., 2021). All these

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requirements highlighting that the role of an educational institution extends beyond mere education; society expects more.

India faces a concerning issue as it ranks among the least happy nations, as reported in the World 'Happiness Report 2025', where it holds the 118th position out of 126 countries. Addressing this problem could involve reforming the Indian education system to positively influence the mindset of students, who will play a pivotal role in the country's future and its pursuit of happiness (Thomson et al., 2018). Additionally, India has witnessed a noticeable rise in the prevalence of anxiety disorders over the years, emerging as a significant public health challenge, as highlighted in the 'National Mental Health Survey of 2015-16'. Anxiety disorders are increasingly common among both adolescents and young adults, particularly in the post-adolescent age group, further underscoring the urgency of addressing mental health concerns in the country (NCRB, 2021).

India boasts the world's third-largest higher education system, following the United States and China (Arunachalam, 2010). However, it is predominantly characterized by a rigid examination-focused approach (Gupta & Sharma, 2020), placing more emphasis on the cognitive domain while giving less priority to the affective domain in education (Khanna & Peterson, 2023). This has constrained our ability to let our imagination soar and stifled our creativity. This characteristic of our education system has hindered and curbed the development of our youth from their early school years and persisted through their college and university experiences (The committee to advice renovation and rejuvenation of higher education, 2009). Furthermore, the prevalence of unhealthy competition among peers (Rabby et al., 2023), coupled with soaring parental and societal expectations, as well as the immense pressure to meet job expectations and the financial backgrounds of families, collectively contribute to the escalating levels of anxiety among students pursuing higher education in India (Ul Haq et al., 2018). These multifaceted factors create a challenging environment that can overwhelm students, impacting their mental well-being and overall academic performance (Wasil, et al., 2021). Hence, it can be one of the potential reasons why India experiences the highest suicide rates within the age bracket of 15 to 29 years, as reported by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for the year 2021. The data from NCRB highlights a distressing figure of 13,089 student suicides in the same year.

The present article explores the levels of anxiety among students in higher education, particularly within professional courses in India. It also examines various government and institutional initiatives aimed at promoting happiness across different educational levels, both in India and globally, with a focus on nurturing the pursuit of happiness within the Indian education system, in alignment with the principles of Madhyastha Darshan (Jeevan Vidya) as envisioned by A. Nagraj.

Status of Anxiety among Students in Professional Programme in India

In India, students in professional programs experience higher levels of anxiety compared to those in non-professional programs in higher education (Ahmad & Ahamad, 2016). Among the various professional programs in India, students from medical backgrounds experience high levels of anxiety (Arun et al., 2022; Sharma & Wavare, 2013). Despite the MBBS curriculum in India aligning with global standards and offering structured exposure to various subjects, students face significant exam pressure, competitive nature of medical education, limited number of seats in prestigious medical colleges creates intense competition, leading to heightened pressure to perform well in exams which contributes to

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anxiety among medical students and aspirants (Arun et al.,2022; Taneja et al.,2018). Many students report feeling nervous, experiencing rapid heartbeat, and fearing forgetting during exams (Raja et al., 2022; Rupani et al.,2016). Additionally, students face significant peer pressure, an uncertain future, and increasing stress, all of which contribute to their anxiety levels (Khursheed & Naseem, 2021). This pressure is often compounded by societal expectations and the desire to meet family and personal goals (Taneja et al.,2018). Furthermore, the demanding nature of medical studies, which require long hours of study and clinical work, can lead to burnout and mental exhaustion (Patil & Aithala.,2018). The high levels of academic anxiety experienced by medical students often lead them to turn to alcohol and other drugs as coping mechanisms (Debnath et al., 2024). Additionally, the suicide rate among medical students is among the highest compared to other student populations (Preeti & Das et al., 2019).

Students pursuing MBA and BALLB degrees commonly experience a moderate level of academic anxiety (Sharma et al., 2022). In contrast, nursing students face not only academic anxiety but also heightened clinical anxiety, which involves hands-on training in healthcare settings, where students must apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world situations (Basu et al.,2016; Helenpuui, & Choudhury, 2024, Vaz et al., 2018).

Engineering students commonly experience test anxiety and academic pressure (Sinha & Jha, 2013), but language learning anxiety, especially regarding English, is considered the most significant among them (Saranraj & Meenakshi, 2016; Saxena et al., 2020). Interestingly, students with low English use anxiety often have higher English class anxiety. Many engineering students who completed their schooling in regional language medium express nervousness about speaking English in class, despite recognizing its importance for their careers. (Saranraj & Meenakshi, 2016).

Students with social anxiety often struggle with tasks such as oral presentations and asking questions during lectures, which can lead to decreased confidence during exams and poorer academic outcomes (Preeti et al., 2017). Additionally social anxiety also includes financial instability, family background among students (Taneja et al., 2018). Female students in all professional programs experience higher levels of anxiety than male students (Rupani et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2022; Sarkar et al., 2017) who may face additional challenges due to cultural expectations. Research reveals that high levels of anxiety among students in professional programs significantly reduce their happiness (Tan et al., 2023). To improve their mental health, students require face-to-face interviews, counseling, and institutional support (Patil & Aithala, 2017; Taneja et al., 2018). Promoting happiness education as interventions and creating supportive learning environments are essential for enhancing the wellbeing and academic performance of these students.

Government/ Institutions Initiative to Promote Happiness in Education

Recent research in the realm of positive psychology strongly underscores the link between a sound mental state and wellbeing, as stated by the World Health Organization (WHO). Researches clearly demonstrates that happiness plays a pivotal role in enhancing the mental health of the younger generation and develop their skill set. Happiness is commonly associated with subjective well-being, which includes positive emotions, the reduction of negative emotions, and overall life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2012). Globally, the integration of happiness education has been shown to enhance students' mental health and learning outcomes irrespective of school and higher education. Several initiatives around the

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world have been introduced to incorporate happiness education at both school and higher education levels.

Table 1 Schools that Provide Happiness Education around the World at School Level

Schools/ Centers	Description
Center for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research	It offers research, training, education in the field of GNH and its application in the various fields, including school education from pre-primary to secondary level.
Geelong Grammar School (GGS) in Australia	It offers positive education from pre-primary to standard secondary level.
"Zest for Living" Akita Prefecture, Japan	It offers positive education for full functioning individuals from primary to elementary level.
Penn Resilience Program (PRP), UK	It offers help to prevent depression and build resilience in adolescents (primary and elementary level).
Happiness Curriculum (Delhi, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh), India	It offers holistic development of students from pre-primary to elementary education.

Several countries have implemented unique educational approaches focusing on holistic development and well-being. In Bhutan, the Gross National Happiness (GNH) philosophy emphasizes collective well-being through education, promoting knowledge, ethics, health, leadership, and lifelong learning (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2014; Sithey et al., 2015). Japan's Akita Prefecture follows the "Zest for Living" principle, aiming to develop all-rounded individuals with strong academics, good values, and a healthy body and mind (Yamaguchi et al., 2014). In Australia, Geelong Grammar School has introduced a positive education program based on Seligman's PERMA model, which focuses on positive emotions, engagement, purpose, relationships, and health (Norrish et. al., 2013; Seligman et. al., 2009). Meanwhile, the UK has been using the Penn Resilience Program (PRP) since 2007 to build resilience in adolescents by teaching emotional intelligence, impulse control, and problem-solving skills (Challen et al.,2014; Gillham et. al., 2007).

In India, Delhi government introduced a happiness curriculum in July 2018, implemented in 1,030 government schools from kindergarten to Grade 8 (SCERT, Delhi, 2018). This curriculum aims to holistically develop all learners. The outcomes of this curriculum reveal that focusing on happiness promotes positive thinking, enhances communication skills, improves academic performance, and fosters positive relationships between students and teachers. Inspired by the Delhi Government's initiative, the Uttarakhand Government launched the "Anandam Pathyacharya - Towards Happiness" curriculum on November 14, 2019. This program is implemented across 17,752 government schools for grades 1 to 8 ((Mishra, 2019, para. 1). Following this, the Uttar Pradesh Government also decided to introduce a similar happiness curriculum, initiating a pilot project in 150 schools across 15 districts (India TV, December 20, 2021).

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Table 2 Colleges, Universities and Organization Provide Happiness and Wellbeing Education around the world in Higher Education

Universities/Center	Description
Royal University of Bhutan	Education, which focuses on the study of GNH and its application in education.
School of Education, University of California, Berkeley	It offers a Master of Arts in Education with an emphasis on Social and Emotional Learning.
Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge	It offers a course on Positive Psychology and Well-being in their Education program.
The University of East London	It offers a Master of Arts in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology.
University of Warwick, UK	It offers a Master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology.
University of Westminster, London	It offers a Master's degree in Applied Positive Psychology.
University of Glasgow	It offers a Master of Education with a concentration in Social and Emotional Learning.
University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education	It offers a Master of Education in Positive Psychology program that focuses on the application of positive psychology in education.
University of Michigan	It offers a Master of Arts in Educational Studies with a concentration in Social and Emotional Learning
University of San Francisco	It offers a course on Gross National Happiness in Bhutan, which covers the history, philosophy, and application of GNH in Bhutan and other countries.
University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education	It offers a Master of Education in Positive Psychology program that focuses on the application of positive psychology in education.
University of the West of Scotland	It offers a Master's degree in Positive Psychology and Well-being.
All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)	Value Added Course on Happiness (Universal Human Values)
IIT Kharagpur	Mooock Courses on Happiness under Reki School of Happiness

Across the world, higher education institutions are increasingly offering courses and programs focused on happiness and well-being to foster human flourishing and enhance emotional intelligence (Seligman, 2011). These programs aim to explore the factors that contribute to individual and community well-being, emphasizing a deeper understanding of positive human experiences (Ryff, 2022). By integrating concepts from positive psychology, social and emotional learning, and sustainable happiness, these courses help students

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develop cognitive and affective skills essential for building resilience, empathy, and a positive outlook throughout their lives. These initiatives aim to cultivate positive characteristics across the lifespan, equipping individuals to lead fulfilling lives while contributing to societal well-being (Fedrickson, 2001; Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2014; Seligman, 2011; Ryff, 20022).

In India, the All-India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) introduced the subject 'Universal Human Values' in 2020, integrating happiness and value education. This course covers fundamental concepts of happiness and prosperity, emphasizing the understanding of the needs of both the emotions and the health (physical and mental) to achieve harmony within oneself, in society, environment and in professional life. The goal is to promote professional ethics, sustainable living and overall well-being (Garg & Sangal, 2009). Additionally, IIT Kharagpur introduced Mooc (Massive Open Online Course) on sustainable happiness.

While the Happiness Curriculum in India is currently limited to school education and higher education particularly in technical education, research shows a significant mental health specially anxiety among students in higher education (Kahnna & Peterson, 2023; Reddy, 2023). The National Crime Report Bureau's 2021 findings indicate a high proportion of suicides among higher education students, particularly those in professional programs (Das at al., 2022). This is because students in professional programmes faced higher level of mental health issues such as anxiety than students in non-professional programme (Ahmad & Ahmad, 2016).

Higher education aims to produce skilled work forced who can effectively participate in the economic, community, and political systems, as well as in the social structure. Thus, implementing practices that promote student happiness should be considered within the realm of both education and government policy-making (Blessinger, 2012).

Pursuit of Happiness - Indian Philosophical Foundation (Madhyastha Darshan)

Happiness is the fundamental goal driving all human endeavors. It is a universally shared desire that transcends age and background (Banavathy, & Choudry, 2013). But is it a state to be comprehended, attained, and lived, or does it arrive on its own schedule? Do the sources of happiness originate internally or externally (Banavathy, & Choudry, 2013)? These are some of the queries that trouble individuals of all ages, from children to adults. The answers to all these questions are deeply rooted in Indian philosophy.

In 1999, Late Sh. A. Nagraj introduced the concept of happiness, which is popularly known as Madhyastha Darshan. According to him, there are three distinct stages of happiness. The first stage of happiness is derived from sensory experiences and is often short-lived. It is characterized by immediate pleasure gained through the five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. The second stage of happiness arises from meaningful relationships and sustained positive emotions such as love, trust, and respect. It is more about emotional fulfillment than immediate pleasure. The third stage of happiness arises from a constructive understanding of self and the world, leading to behavioral changes and a deeper awareness of our thoughts and actions. (Jeevan Vidya, 2018, p-7)

Nagraj argues that liberation from ignorance and illusion is pivotal for attaining happiness. This liberation necessitates recognizing the interconnectedness of all existence and living in

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harmony with the natural order. He critiques the prevailing education system, asserting that it promotes materialism and neglects the significance of human conducts (Jeevan Vidya, 2018, p-30-40).

Nagraj calls for a paradigm shift in education, moving away from purely materialistic and fragmented approaches. According to him, education plays a critical role in imparting wisdom and fostering virtuous human conduct. He argues that education should prioritize the inculcation of values and ethics, transcending mere academic knowledge to attain happiness (Jeevan Vidya, 2018, p-92-97).

Madhyastha Darshan proposes an educational system based on wisdom, emphasizing:

- Cultivating self-compassion, empathy, and responsible behavior
- Understanding the essence of human existence
- Fostering a sense of fairness and equality in all aspects of life

By incorporating these elements, education can become a powerful tool for fostering happiness, wellbeing, and a more just society.

1. Cultivating Self-Compassion, Empathy, and Responsible Behavior

The essence of being human lies in fostering orderly behavior, which is the result of embracing wisdom conclusively. Wisdom remains constant across generations, with any variation being in its expression of empathy, self-compassion, and responsible behavior. Teaching individuals to be humane involves instilling these values and behaviors, ensuring that human conduct is both empathetic and responsible (Nagraj, 2018, p-12,13, 14). Thus, wisdom can seamlessly integrate into the living traditions of humanity, emphasizing empathy, self-compassion, and responsible behavior.

Self-compassion and empathy are predictors of happiness among students in higher education indicating a significant positive relationship between self-compassion, empathy and happiness. These findings suggest that self-compassion can be particularly beneficial for late adolescent and young adult students in higher education as they navigate the challenges of developing their identities and self-worth, easing their transition from adolescence to adulthood (Caglayan & Eldeleklioglu, 2016; Inam et al., 2021; Jafari, 2020).

Research suggests that student's sense of happiness is not solely determined by the external circumstances. Some students seem to have a natural tendency to maintain high levels of happiness, even in challenging situations (Wei et al., 2010). One factor that may contribute to this resilience is young students' attachment style, which means how they perceive their personal self and their self within the society. Inclination of a student either towards anxiety or happiness is influenced by the level of self-compassion, which is even true for attachment avoidance that is linked to happiness through empathy toward others (Wei et al., 2010). Additionally, it is suggested that practicing compassion can lead to long-term improvements in happiness and self-esteem, and may be particularly helpful for anxious individuals in the short term (Mongrain, 2016). The results of some other studies indicated that kindness, humanity, and mindfulness are positively related to both happiness and life satisfaction. On the other hand, self-judgment and isolation were negatively associated with these variables (Mulazım & Eldeleklioglu, 2016). Multiple studies worldwide indicate a strong relationship between self-compassion and happiness, with potential benefits in improving mental health among adult students.

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2. Understanding Essence of Human Existence

In Madhyastha Dardhan, Jeevan is compared to an 'atom' whose essence is fulfilled, hence termed conscious (wisdom). Within it resides potent, fully manifested intelligence and sensitivity (Jeevan Vidya-2018, p-26-28). The fundamental goal of Jeevan is the pursuit of happiness, which entails leading a resolved life for all. True happiness can only be achieved through unity with others, fostering strong relationships and effective communication. This interconnectedness is essential for the collective wellbeing and fulfillment of every individual. Study revealed that a positive relationship and social communication with family, friends, colleagues, teachers, and unknown person, stimulate a certain level of happiness among adult students in higher education (Thongsri et al., 2024). Positive family communication, social interactions, and specific psychological interventions can contribute to greater happiness and wellbeing among students in professional education (Norrish et al., 2013). Positive attitude (positive communication and relationship) among adult students improves their overall wellbeing (Catalino., Algae, & Fredrickson, 2014).

3. Fostering a Sense of Fairness and Equality in all Aspects of Life

In the philosophy of Madhyastha Darshan (Nagraj, 2018, p- 48,49), wisdom serves as the cornerstone for human enlightenment. When wisdom is universally embraced, humanity can coexist with justice. This notion of justice is characterized by a profound sense of fairness, equality, and harmonious living within personal and societal level. The manifestation of justice begins within the self and the family unit, then extends to the broader societal framework, and ultimately encompasses the entire planet. Living justly entails experiencing a fulfilled, happy, and harmonious existence.

The concept of happiness in education should include social justice (Zembylas, 2019). Justice can be cultivated as a life skill that is nurtured democratically within human behavior, ensuring that the reproduction of unfortunate differences based on class, caste, gender, or ethnicity does not undermine the principle of equality in society (Ahamed, 2010; Lie, 2022). In our society, there are many conflicts and diversities, making the inculcation of a sense of happiness among students very challenging. While a happy classroom is desirable, educators need to embrace some practices and recognize its potential for fostering deeper understanding and critical thinking (Rabindranath et al., 2020).

Happiness should be promoted as a way to reduce harm and suffering, portraying it as both good and a means to achieving good (Jackson & Bingham, 2018). The significance of happiness in education lies in its role in advancing social justice. The educational process should delve into the theoretical and practical aspects of promoting happiness. A critical perspective is then outlined, highlighting happiness as an intersubjective experience rather than an individual feeling (Jackson & Bingham, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the pursuit of happiness in professional education is a multifaceted endeavor that involves addressing various societal, economic, and mental health challenges (Thomson et al., 2018). The Indian education system, while making strides in promoting happiness through initiatives like the Happiness Curriculum, still faces significant hurdles, such as income disparities, mental health stigma, and a rigid examination-focused approach (Rabindranath et al., 2020). To truly foster happiness and well-being among students, there needs to be a holistic approach that integrates knowledge acquisition with character development, emphasizes values and ethics, and promotes critical thinking and empathy. By

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reimagining education to prioritize happiness and social justice, we can create a more equitable and fulfilling educational experience for all students (Nagraj, 2018).

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