

Decolonising and Re-imagining Pedagogical Practices: Producing Plural Knowledge Systems

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions among other things, an education system that is firmly rooted in Indian values and culture, offering quality and accessible education to all, thereby producing India as an equitable and vibrant knowledge society. Consequently, this paper deals with the NEP and the incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the course curriculum, specifically with reference to, and using University of Delhi as a case study. In the specific context of social sciences and humanities, Western liberal thought has dominated the field, including its power in institutions, its presence in syllabi, pedagogical practices, and philosophical traditions, among others. Hence Indian theoretical and philosophical approaches and traditional sources of knowledge have been deliberately sidelined, termed as unscientific and often denigrated and marginalized. This discourse has produced impregnable walls between the two, classifying them as two separate categories of knowledge systems. However, as we have seen with the NEP 2020 and the inclusion of IKS, it is possible for traditional and indigenous knowledge systems to contest the ideological and epistemological oppression of Western schools of thought. Not by dismantling the other, but perhaps by conflating the two as part of India's plural knowledge system instead.

Keywords: NEP, indigenous knowledge, decolonizing, pedagogy, Indian knowledge system.

1. Introduction

From a sociological standpoint there are three theoretical perspectives on education, namely (i) functional, (ii) conflict and (iii) symbolic interactionist (Ballantine & Hammack, 2009). Functionalist thought makes provision for (i) Socialization, where education is crucial in imparting societal norms, values, and behaviours to individuals, helping them become functional members of society, (ii) Social Integration, which brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds, fostering a sense of community and unity within society, (iii) Social Placement where education acts as a sorting mechanism, determining individuals' roles and positions in society based on their skills, knowledge, and qualifications, and (iv) Social and Cultural Innovation, where education fosters creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, which are essential for societal progress and cultural development (Schneider and Silverman, 2010). The conflict perspective on the other hand expands on education's role in either perpetuating or mitigating social inequality. Some of these aspects include tracking and standardised testing, hidden curriculum, funding disparities and learning disparities, among others. Addressing these systemic issues requires

comprehensive reforms aimed at promoting equity and inclusivity in education. This may include equitable funding formulas, efforts to reduce tracking and standardized testing bias, culturally responsive teaching practices, and policies to support students from marginalized backgrounds (Oakes, 2005). By addressing these disparities, education can become a powerful tool for promoting social mobility and reducing inequality in society (Booher-Jennings, 2008). Finally, the symbolic interactionism school of thought emphasizes the significant role of social interaction within educational settings and how it can influence various aspects of students' development and academic outcomes. For this approach, understanding the influence of social interactions within educational settings is essential for promoting inclusive and equitable learning environments. Educators can work to create classroom cultures that challenge gender stereotypes, provide opportunities for all students to excel regardless of their background or identity, and foster positive teacher-student relationships based on high expectations and support (Hill, Macrine, and Gabbard, 2010). By recognizing the impact of social interactions on students' development and academic

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achievement, schools can better address the diverse needs and experiences of their students, ultimately promoting greater educational equity and success for all.

However, irrespective of the perspective towards education, in any society, education plays a crucial role in shaping and organizing of the individual self and the social self. Education does not and cannot operate in a vacuum, sealed from society or its civilizational values. Hence the spirit of education in any society at any point of time reflects what that society thinks of itself and expects from itself. Undoubtedly then, the needs and aspirations of a society are the key functional requirements from the education system. Subsequently in this context, it becomes crucial to understand and study the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

The NEP 2020 envisions an education system that is firmly rooted in Indian values and culture, offering quality and accessible education to all, thereby producing India as an equitable and vibrant knowledge society. It is important to note that this policy is predicated upon five foundational principles of access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability. One of the significant aspects of NEP is also promoting Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) formally via promotion of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) on its part is playing a key role in assimilating Indian Knowledge Systems with existing higher education curriculum, in order to complement and enhance education by facilitating a more holistic perspective towards education that deepens human knowledge, promotes civilizational heritage and preserves cultural traditions to enrich students. IKS seeks to promote education as interconnected and interdependent, thereby fostering skills of observation, critical thinking and reflexive temper. Undeniably the thrust is on indigenous and traditional knowledge that has been practiced by communities and societies, and passed on to generations orally. Since traditional and indigenous knowledge systems were never formally codified and structured, there is often a tendency to dismiss them as oral narratives. However there is considerable evidence of how traditional community living practices and knowledge have been used to conserve environment, utilize resources effectively and promoting sustainability.

This paper deals with the New Education Policy and the incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems to explore the following questions: (i) what are the challenges in implementation and adoption of plural knowledge systems in institutes of higher education, and (ii) what are the possible ways in which traditional knowledge systems can complement modern education to produce plural knowledge traditions.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Approach

In India, the downward filtration theory of education guided by Macaulay and the colonial empire's mission of imparting education remained in vogue in the years preceding India's independence (Macaulay, 1935). This theory continued for many years even after Independence, partly owing to what Jayaram (1990) also referred to as colonial hangover and colonial dependency. It is only with educational reforms in the new education policies and particularly the Constitutional amendment of making Right to Education a fundamental right in the year 2002, that there was push towards a 'bottom-up' approach to dissemination of education, by encouraging local participation, decentralization and community involvement. Subsequently this paper adopts the 'bottom-up' approach to understand how a plural knowledge tradition which encompasses indigenous knowledge traditions and modern education can be harmoniously blended together, as envisioned by the New Education Policy 2020.

In order to probe these questions, a survey was conducted with 50 students studying in two undergraduate colleges of University of Delhi. The respondents included students who had been studying the new syllabus for at least a year, as well as students who have joined their undergraduate studies in the last 2 months. The mixed methodology also included in-depth unstructured interviews with 12 students who had been studying NEP syllabus for at least a year. Snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants from known networks. The research participants were from the social sciences and humanities background, including but not limited to, literature, political science, economics, journalism and commerce. The age group of participants ranged from 18 to 21 years, with both self-identified male and female students. Surveys were conducted between July 2023 and September 2023. The interviews were conducted in the month of August 2023.

3. Imagining Education in India: Brief Review of literature

Education is indeed one of the major social institutions that profoundly shapes human behavior and society as a whole. While it's commonly associated with formal learning in classroom settings, its influence extends far beyond that narrow definition. While formal education in schools, colleges, and universities is crucial, education encompasses much more than just classroom instruction. It includes informal learning experiences, such as learning from family members, peers, workplaces, communities, and even through media and technology (Ramarao, 2020). These diverse learning experiences contribute to the holistic development of individuals and influence their attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Education serves multiple functions in society, beyond imparting

curriculum-based knowledge and skills. It plays a crucial role in socialization, helping individuals learn societal norms, values, and behaviors that are essential for functioning effectively within a community (Vardhan, 2014). Additionally, education facilitates social integration by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and fostering a sense of belonging and unity (Patel, 2021). Education is a lifelong process that continues beyond formal schooling. It involves ongoing learning and adaptation to changing societal needs, technological advancements, and personal growth opportunities. Lifelong learning enables individuals to acquire new knowledge, skills, and competencies throughout their lives, enhancing their personal and professional development and contributing to societal progress (Regmi, 2015). Education encompasses all the experiences that individuals accumulate throughout their lifetime in various social institutions, including family, schools, workplaces, religious institutions, and communities. These experiences shape individuals' perspectives, attitudes, and identities, influencing their interactions with others and their contributions to society (Babbar and Johannsdottir, 2024). Recognizing the broad scope and multifaceted nature of education is essential for understanding its profound impact on individuals and society. By acknowledging the diverse forms of learning and the multiple functions of education, a society can better appreciate its role in shaping human behavior, promoting social cohesion, and fostering lifelong personal and societal development.

Coomaraswamy (1909), modern philosopher and historian, in his essays on Indian education, was particularly convinced that India could only attain political freedom and independence from the British rule if it could take back the control of Indian education from them. He is perhaps one of the first proponents of decolonising education in India. Stressing on preserving of heritage, tradition and culture, Coomaraswamy believed that it was crucial for civilisational continuity. He was also very critical of the schooling system in India, where he observed that both the Government and Missionary schools chose to deliberately ignore Indian culture in the name of modern education, thereby relegating indigenous culture to the margins.

The pioneering report titled, *Field Studies on the Sociology of Education in India* (1970) by sociologists I.P. Desai, M.S. Gore and Suma Chitnis included field studies that examined social background, social values and occupational aspirations and satisfactions of teachers, students and parents. The primary reason behind these field studies was to probe the role education could play in society and how it could help bring social change. This study, like a few before and after it, were occupied with infusing 'rationality' or a rational approach among

students, placing it above humanitarian values that were a hallmark of Indian education system. In their field studies, they faced the conundrum of the social role played by education. Firstly, education is expected to discharge the social function of ensuring continuity of tradition, and secondly, education must augur change in society. Since a complete break from tradition is impossible and also posed a challenge of reference and context, consequently this led to picking and choosing the elements of past, to be fused with elements of change. For instance, promotion of scientific temper and outlook was and still continues to be an important pillar of the Indian education system. However, the continuity and introduction of certain philosophies and values further jeopardized the Indian education system. Jayaram (1990) in his significant contribution to the sociology of education discussed the issue of, among other things, the impact of colonialism on education, and the inherited structure of education which produced, as he argued, 'neo-colonial dependency' even after Independence. He argues that the spread of Macaulay's ideas and English education was not benevolence on the part of the British but on the contrary, existed to serve various interests, such as those of proselyting, and inculcation of new values of Western liberal Christian concepts – an eclectic mix of ideas, at the heart of which was making Indians familiar with British capitalist economic system, becoming consumers of British products, and finally to become effective bureaucrats for the colonial enterprise and machinery. This transition from studying English as a language to incorporating English as the medium of instruction has had far-reaching consequences. Bourdieu (1977) in his work on the sociology of education, through the studying of the education system in France has pointed out that there is always a tension between which aspects of cultural past will be preserved, conserved and reproduced in the schools. He argues that it is the culture of the dominant groups that gets legitimised and ultimately embodied in the schools, thereby creating distinctions between what is the acceptable cultural capital for the students to possess.

Jayaram (1990) in further dismantling the myth that the British brought in a broad-based educational system that was accessible to all, in opposition to a supposedly reserved and limited educational system (*gurukula*) only for a privileged few, cites Collector reports to the Provincial Governors from 1826 onwards as evidence to the contrary. The imparting of indigenous knowledge systems through indigenous schools and colleges was prolific in the eighteenth century, and in fact the representation of diverse castes and genders was clearly visible. This denigration of the pre-British education system is perhaps precisely the reason why Indian indigenous systems were neglected, degraded, and not considered as part of the Indian modern education project.

This produced a class of English elites which was considerable alienated from the masses and reeled under colonial hangover – something that had significant ramifications post-Independence.

In an intriguing study on Ayurveda education in India, and how this indigenous knowledge gets negotiated while it sits uneasily with biomedicine in Kerala, Abraham (2011) presents how indigenous knowledge can critique and also collaborate with modern education, to reproduce a plural knowledge system. This study is significant in how it demonstrates how traditional knowledge is imparted in a modern educational institution, and the educational and cultural processes involved dismantling the binaries between tradition and modernity, and at the same time resisting the authority of legitimacy and "allopathic hegemony".

This study is instructional for our purposes, for multiple reasons. First it points to the possibility of a plural knowledge system, where indigenous and traditional knowledge can sit comfortably with 'Western' systems and philosophies of knowledge, without the latter undermining the former. Second, it reveals the ways in which the two systems of knowledge can harmoniously blend with each other, thereby providing holistic educational perspectives to students.

4. Notes from the Field: Findings

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems with existing educational structure in the NEP mode followed by University of Delhi has been operationalized by including Value-added courses (VAC), that enhance and complement the curriculum, offer opportunities of interdisciplinary study, provide students with employability

Table 1 : Details of Survey Respondents

Sl. No.	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Course	Sl. No.	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Course
1	Manas	18	M	English	26	Aditi	20	F	Journalism
2	Rahul	18	M	English	27	Neha	18	F	Journalism
3	Agasyta	18	M	English	28	Nidhi	18	F	Journalism
4	Pranay	18	M	English	29	Shagun	18	F	Journalism
5	Nikhil	18	M	English	30	Richa	18	F	Journalism
6	Nitin	18	M	Political Science	31	Tanvi	18	F	Journalism
7	Vinayak	18	M	Political Science	32	Girija	19	F	Journalism
8	Aditya	20	M	Political Science	33	Sarika	19	F	Political Science
9	Abhinav	20	M	Political Science	34	Anubha	19	F	Political Science
10	Aravind	19	M	Political Science	35	Jyoti	19	F	Political Science
11	Arjun	18	M	Political Science	36	Sneha	18	F	Political Science
12	Adil	18	M	Journalism	37	Rachita	18	F	Political Science
13	Usman	19	M	Journalism	38	Shruti	20	F	English
14	Zafar	19	M	Journalism	39	Ananya	19	F	English
15	Sridhar	19	M	Journalism	40	Sunaina	18	F	English
16	Vivek	19	M	Economics	41	Naina	18	F	English
17	Sandeep	19	M	Economics	42	Malvika	18	F	English
18	Danish	19	M	Economics	43	Azra	18	F	English
19	Tuhinanshu	19	M	Economics	44	Saba	19	F	English
20	Amit	19	M	Economics	45	Hiba	19	F	English
21	Abhishek	18	M	Economics	46	Anam	19	F	English
22	Mayank	20	M	Commerce	47	Mabel	20	F	Commerce
23	Rachit	20	M	Commerce	48	Iravati	18	F	Commerce
24	Aman	20	M	Commerce	49	Sravanthi	20	F	Economics
25	Anant	20	M	Commerce	50	Maya	20	F	Economics

Table 2 : Details of Interviewees

Sl. No.	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Course	Sl. No.	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Course
1	Manas	18	M	English	7	Iravati	18	F	Commerce
2	Rahul	18	M	English	8	Sravanthi	20	F	Economics
3	Adil	18	M	Journalism	9	Maya	20	F	Economics
4	Tanvi	18	F	Journalism	10	Aditya	20	M	Political Science
5	Shruti	20	F	English	11	Arjun	18	M	Political Science
6	Ananya	19	F	English	12	Sneha	18	F	Political Science

skills as well as necessary like skills. For instance, the spirit behind designing VACs in the University of Delhi is guided by six fundamental pillars: (i) Ethical, cultural and constitutional values, (ii) Critical thinking, (iii) Indian Knowledge Systems, (iv) Scientific Temperament, (v) Creative writing, communication and presentation skills and finally, (vi) Physical education, sports and teamwork. All these tenets are the guiding force behind devising courses that allow students to develop holistic perspectives towards the very act of learning and education, as opposed to the narrow, unidimensional approach of studying only their core discipline. Some of the VACs offered by the University of Delhi include, but are not limited to, Gandhi and Education, Art of Living, Vedic Mathematics, Culture and Communication, Digital Empowerment, Science and Society, Ayurveda and Nutrition, Emotional Intelligence, Sports for Life, Swacch Bharat, and Ethics and Values in Ancient Indian Traditions, among others. All of these courses are designed with specific course objectives, learning outcomes, units of study, essential readings, practical components of the course and assessment and examination method.

The survey questionnaire was kept anonymous, in order to encourage candor and maintain confidentiality of the participants responses. Wherever names are mentioned, pseudonyms have been used for identification. The initial list of questions included their area of study and their area of interest, as well as demographic details. The findings from the survey as well as interviews have been divided into larger thematic concerns for discussion in this section.

4.1 Choice of Value-added Courses

While the University offers a range of VACs to students, the survey asked the students to share how they decided to opt for a particular course. Around 60% of the students revealed that their choice of course was guided by discussion with their friends, peers and seniors. Adil and Tanvi shared that they perused the syllabus of the course to make sure it was suitable to them. A very small percentage admitted to choosing a course merely by reading the name and whether or not it appealed to them. During the interviews, it was also shared by Maya and Aditya that

students felt that they did not get the right orientation and introduction to these courses before they made a choice. Jyoti suggested that an interactive session where what the course entails, how it will be taught and its real-life implications for them would have been helpful in making an informed decision on their part. This is perhaps the biggest challenge of producing a plural knowledge system guided by Indian pedagogy. Optional and elective courses require that students are given optimum information and orientation on the course. Consequently, introductory classes on each VAC can be held to provide students with the ability to make an informed decision while choosing a VAC. The wealth of VACs offered by the University perhaps needs a proper introduction for the students as there is no dearth of options.

4.2 Feedback on Syllabus

Participants were also asked about the relevance, structure and coherence in the syllabus. Rachit, Shruti and Ananya admitted to not knowing the syllabus of their elective papers well before the examinations. Some students (about 30%) shared how they discussed the syllabus with their teachers, including how sub-topics were vague and subjective. Some of their concerns were met with helplessness by the teachers themselves. A recurrent issue raised during the interviews with Arjun, Sneha and Manas pertained to how the syllabus needs to be more defined, coherent and organized. Their concern was that a disjointed syllabus led to haphazard teaching, which ultimately defeated the purpose of adding value to their education. Iravati during the interview shared her views on a paper titled, 'Ecology and Literature'. The syllabus of this paper only lists texts which need to be read, presumably having a component of environment in them. She revealed how she could not find the connection between studying ecology and literature and perhaps some sessions on the important linkages between the two in literary practice would give proper context to studying those texts. The tradition of writing on environment or having environmental concerns in the backdrop has a long, rich history which needs to be properly contextualized depending upon the literature and the era being examined. Since this

was missing from the syllabus, she hoped for a better structure in future.

4.3 Pedagogic Practice

The University has introduced a huge basket of VACs which cater to the interests and needs of various students. At the same time a lot of these courses have been introduced for the first time, and teachers are perhaps not fully equipped to teach them. Malavika and Mayank shared that many teachers used teaching material from the Internet and read out the key points pertaining to a topic, without engaging students fully in the historicity of those concepts. During the interview, Shruti, Rahul and Maya shared that their teachers confided in them that since they were teaching these courses for the first time, even they were not academically trained in these subjects. Often teachers rushed to finish the syllabus by providing a superficial understanding to concepts and terms, without fully tying up those ideas in a broader context. While the course design of each paper clearly spells out the learning objectives, outcome, field projects, readings and practical activities, often students complained of being restricted to traditional classroom teaching without the use of any visual aids even. Arjun discussed the 'Gandhi and education' VAC and how the students were fairly excited to study this paper. Further discussion revealed that while the course design document clearly spelled out practical component which involved visit to the Gandhi Museum, excursions to Gandhi Ashrams and workshops in collaboration with Gandhi Bhawan and other centers on khadi, organic farming, handicrafts etc. they were not able to experience these as the teaching was limited to theoretical classroom discussion which was largely unidirectional. This reveals a deeper problem that teachers tasked with offering VACs need to be properly oriented in the courses themselves. This would require training in how to teach these papers to students, not from an examination perspective, but as an important component of a plural knowledge tradition.

4.4 Reference and Context

As is applicable with the study of core disciplines, students often expect to be given a context to what they are studying and why. Every discipline has emerged from certain questions and needs that arose in society, and these needs were addressed by developing fields of study that could sufficiently deal with those problems. Similarly Saba, Anam and Sravanthi shared that they are rarely given a proper context or reference to studying a VAC, which makes the teaching and learning exist in a vacuum, oriented primarily towards passing the minimum requirements of the course and earning credits. This challenge is inter-related to the previous issue, where teachers themselves need an orientation in how to teach these VACs. A positive experience shared by Anant on a course titled, National Cadet Corps. (NCC) demonstrated

how they were taught the rationale and objective behind the NCC, giving them a historical context as well as contemporary relevance of national integration, national security, youth's role and the need for critical thinking and a problem-solving mindset.

4.5 Study Material

Another overarching concern shared by students was the lack of study material, or the issue of unavailability and inaccessibility. For instance, a popular VAC course, Art of Living has a list of essential readings, which are predominantly from the field of psychology. A lot of these texts are dense and require tutorials and guidance for reading them. These prescribed texts are also for psychology students, and hence there is an assumption that many basic terms and concepts are already clear to the reader. Moreover, Sarika, Anubha and Jyoti also shared a technical issue. Since their institution did not offer psychology as a subject, these texts were not available in their institution's library, thereby discouraging and making it difficult for them to refer to those texts. This led them to using the Internet and unverified sources for information.

4.6 Engaging Content

While the University has made every effort to make VACs engaging and interactive, a few students (20%) confided that they found them "boring" and "unappealing". On further questioning, Rahul, Tanvi and Manas during the interview revealed that the students found some of the papers "archaic" and "not relevant". Ananya and Senha spoke about a course titled 'Digital Empowerment' which they felt was not relevant and up to date, considering that the topics were elementary. Another course on 'Ethics and Culture' was considered too vague by Shruti, without rooted in any philosophy, and ended up being generic. Another course that Richa and Sunaina discussed was 'Culture and Communication' which according to them did not provide any primer or linkages between cultural traditions of India and India's communication philosophy. In effect this course was rendered ineffectual for them as barring a topic on *Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*, the topics were generic and based on elementary introduction to listening, speaking and writing.

4.7 Scheduling and Credit Concerns

Another recurring concern shared by students was the scheduling of VACs, core papers, other electives and skill enhancement courses. Nikhil, Vinayak, Pranay and Agstya reported exhaustion, considering the number of classes that are scheduled each day. Often this leads students to miss elective courses in order to study core papers instead. This particular concern can have an easy fix perhaps, where scheduling of VACs can be done in a manner where they don't clash with core papers, or increase the number of learning hours for students on a given day.

5. Conclusion

Jayaram (1990) had asked, if colonial dependence in education was inevitable? While India achieved and continues to celebrate its Independence, the colonial hangover in terms of neo-colonial educational institutions and practices continue to make its development fraught with challenges. As with many former colonies, the modernization project has involved a transformation from a traditional to a modern society. However, any development cannot be viable and tenable on the ruins of indigenous structures of a society, and nor is it desirable to have unidirectional development. Hence while India is an active participant of the global system of economic and capital accumulation, its process of decolonization to deal with educational crisis must continue in the form of restructuring, reorientation and appreciation of the past and the present.

The preceding discussion on Indian Knowledge Systems, and its assimilation with modern education structures in the form of a plural knowledge tradition has revealed some challenges as well as solutions for the way forward. In the specific discussion on Value Added Courses introduced by the University of Delhi, as a way to harmoniously build a continuum between traditional knowledge traditions and modern education has revealed certain crucial areas which need further work. The survey responses and interviews, while discussing their challenges and teething troubles with VACs, also reveal promise, hope and excitement towards these courses and point towards the possibilities of building a truly plural knowledge tradition in India.

In the specific context of social sciences and humanities, Western liberal thought has dominated the field, including its power in institutions, its presence in syllabi, pedagogical practices, philosophical traditions, among others. Indian theoretical and philosophical approaches and traditional sources of knowledge have been sidelined, termed as unscientific and often denigrated and marginalized. This discourse has produced impregnable walls between the two, classifying them as two categories of knowledge systems. However, as we have seen with the NEP 2020 and the inclusion of IKS, it is possible for traditional and indigenous knowledge systems to contest the ideological and epistemological oppression of Western schools of thought. Not by dismantling the other, but perhaps by conflating the two as part of India's plural knowledge system instead.

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