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Knowledge, curricula, and teaching methods: the case of India

Padma M. Sarangapani

- 1 In this short note I have developed the outline of what I regard as the major phases in India's curriculum and teaching, from the pre-independence period to the present day. It is a quick sketch of a complex country with a complex history. I have not developed the idea of regionalism in this sketch, nor have I explored the question of tribal peoples within India, which presents a new set of problems and issues that are also worthy of exploration. I have also not dealt with the questions of teacher preparation. In this outline, I have presented a more "national" view. I have tried to delineate the key ideas in education – curriculum and pedagogy – that have dominated in each period. Rather than thinking of each new phase as supplanting the earlier one, we can think of them as a series of waves entering into the Indian space over time, coexisting, interacting with and altering the status of the earlier ones, but not fully displacing them. In contemporary India, we continue to find multiple ideas coexisting and also enjoying legitimacy with different sections of society.

Historical context

- 2 The modern school system in India has its origins in the colonial system of education that was shaped between the 1830s and 1870s. Dominant features of the current system, including the centrality of the textbook and examinations, and a highly centralised system of education administration (within a federal structure, centralised at the level of each state), can all be directly traced to the colonial institutional structures. Although there was a widespread presence of village teachers engaged with literacy and numeracy instruction (albeit restricted to higher castes and males only) as well as centres for "shastric learning" (Sanskrit and Arabic), which could be considered as an indigenous system, the British system supplanted these "schools" or centres of learning and effectively cut off forms of state support or patronage that they had previously enjoyed. The curriculum of the colonial school system included Western knowledge, the English

language, and “(colonial) citizenship” and excluded all forms of indigenous knowledge. The new system was accessible to all castes and communities and over time also addressed the education of girls; however, it was never intended to be a universal education system. Much of the spread of the system is to some degree accounted for by government effort in some parts of India, but also that of Christian missionaries, local rulers who promoted education in their princely states, social reformers, and finally, the involvement of the private sector. The twin interests of social reform through enlightenment, knowledge, and education, as well as the lure of employment through Western education, drove the expansion of the system. It is worth remembering that this period was also the time when in the colonising European countries the idea of national systems of education and compulsory schooling were developing, and curricular and pedagogic imaginations were being re-formed. What is striking is how quickly debates and developments in Europe found their reflection in the colonies and also how curricular and pedagogic innovation and development in the colonies sometimes preceded and informed progressive changes in Europe. Indigenous centres for shastric learning continued but on a much smaller scale and with limited sources of patronage. The indigenous village teacher seems to have become displaced by, or perhaps subsumed – in a few forms – in, the new “school”; changes in the status and agency of the teacher, now a government servant, have been noted by researchers. It has been noted that features of the indigenous system, particularly the centrality of an authoritarian teacher, knowledge as received, and pedagogies and approaches to learning including repetition and memorisation by an obedient student, all took root in and soon dominated the colonial school – this has been characterized as the “textbook culture”. The idea of the “guru” and the need for legitimate learning to be mediated by the guru is a popular and well-elaborated theme in the indigenous knowledge systems and in popular folklore. Within Indian schools even today, we continue to find the idea of the guru as well as traditional modes of teaching and learning.

Early phase of education reform

- 3 The phase in which Indian nationalism emerged, eventually leading to the anti-colonial nationalist movement (1890s to 1940s), may be regarded as a first phase of education reform. Reforms were largely informed by a reaction to the colonial rejection of indigenous knowledge and identity, but also by the need for social reform, modern ideas, and the benefits of science, which were a part of the colonial curriculum. Four distinctive responses, from the late 1890s and early 1900s onwards, can be summarised as follows.
- 4 Firstly, Swami Vivekanand, who articulated a vision of education for character-building and confidence by drawing on indigenous Vedantic philosophy and practice was an early voice and influence. A second response was formulated by Rabindranath Tagore, a celebrated poet, who reacted to the alienating nature of colonial education, and sought to build an alternative system that drew on art and related to nature as its core. Tagore was linked to humanistic education movements in Europe around the same time. A third response came from Jyotirao Phule, whose focus was on the education of the Dalits and women and who argued for an education that was more relevant to rural contexts. The fourth response was from Gandhi, who also formulated an anti-colonial education vision that placed work and the learning of crafts at its core, in place of a curriculum that was academic and bookish.

- 5 Education which supported self-reliance and which was relevant to a range of traditional lifestyles and occupations and not oriented to government employment, education for cultural and linguistic continuity and integration into, and being situated in, the world (rather than alienation), education for self-confidence and character rather than servility, and universal access through which social reform could be achieved, were dominant concerns of this period. As Indians gained control over education policy, particularly in the post-independence period from 1947 onwards, these interests began to inform the policymaking of a national system of education, though not without contestation, and perhaps were eventually subverted, assuming tokenistic forms within the mainstream. So much so that what continued was a highly differentiated system of education with a strong academic orientation, and with English-medium schooling offered by non-government or private actors as the most desirable education – and frequently associated with “quality”. Inadequate funding to make such a “quality education” universal is also strong theme that emerges in the early post-independence period.

Post-independence: the 1960s

- 6 The 1960s may be regarded as heralding the growth of science education in India, along with “scientific” curriculum development. The education policy formally linked the spread of education, and in particular of science, to national development. In the 1970s, new developments took shape in voluntary agencies and people’s science movements, which sought to bring a new understanding of what it means to learn science: by doing science, as well as harnessing science for development and taking science into rural India. Perhaps the most important and influential of these was the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). Paralleling developments in the United-Kingdom in particular (Nuffield Science), university scientists worked in rural middle schools developing a science curriculum that completely rejected textbookish knowledge and emphasised learning by doing, thinking, and reasoning. These efforts extended from science to social science and primary school curricula between the 1980s and the early part of the 1990s. The 1960s and 1970s were also the period in which Bloom cast a powerful influence on curriculum development and teacher education – with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) supporting Indian scholars to study under Bloom. Bloom’s approach to curriculum development was influential the world over, seeming to complete and operationalise Tyler’s promise of a “method” for curriculum and pedagogy. The same period also saw the emergence of new cognitive theories of learning in the West. However, these did not enter into mainstream Indian education: India’s curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education missed the “cognitive revolution” that was taking place in the rest of the world. Instead the behavioural-objectives approach in India drew on a behavioural-psychology base in teacher education and introduced new “scientific” orthodoxies into education. The teacher-centred approach to instruction that drew on Bloom and behaviourism did not challenge traditional textbook curriculum. The HSTP, which challenged conventional notions of school curriculum and teaching, remained an experiment at the periphery.

Universalisation of Elementary Education and reform phase from the 1980s onwards

- 7 From the mid-1980s onwards the curriculum and pedagogy in Indian schools have been increasingly influenced by central government initiatives and supported by civil society activism in a range of large-scale initiatives and programmes for universalising elementary education. The initial phase was largely driven by the central government's own Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) under the National Policy on Education 1986, which heralded the National Literacy Mission and increased access to education through Operation Blackboard and large-scale non-formal education schemes. An important development in this phase was the entry of international aid and loans for primary education, which allowed for increased central influence through "mission mode" programmes to increase access and quality. These centrally sponsored schemes in mission mode have progressively enabled the inclusion and spread of child-centred ideas and social justice educational themes and concerns. The early stages of these developments were possible because of openings created by the aided District Primary Education Programmes (DPEP), which enabled revising of primary-level textbooks and in-service teacher training towards more "joyful" pedagogies, and altering teachers' mindsets and attitudes towards marginalised communities and gender issues. Curricular and pedagogic responses to support inclusion of marginalised communities and girls, the need for far greater context specificity and inclusion of the child's language and experience in the curriculum, entered into administrative concerns and "quality" talk. Large-scale initiatives began to link the question of access to school to curricula and pedagogy in addition to infrastructure and recruitment of teachers. The DPEP and subsequent Sarva Siksha Abhiyan programme, have increasingly oriented curricular and pedagogic considerations towards the issues of inclusion and equity. These large-scale centrally sponsored initiatives have generally favoured a movement towards a child-centred curriculum. However, in programming for "quality" there is a palpable tension between favouring the achievement of basic literacy and numeracy through greater teacher accountability and micro-managed mastery-learning curricula, and favouring professionalization of the teacher, teacher professional development and resource support, and more constructivist curricula. It must be acknowledged that between 2000 and 2014, these efforts almost exclusively concern the government schooling system, which has become equated with the question of education of the children of the poor. A parallel development has been to question the ability of the state to provide quality education, and suggest that private providers provide better value for money and are more capable of producing and ensuring "quality". There is a growing presence of privately provided services to schools, from curriculum and teachers to testing, not only in the rich private schools, but also in private schools that cater to the poor and to government. In this range of private schools which are English medium, we still find forms of the exam-oriented, textbook cultures adapted to new imperatives of competitive examinations.
- 8 We may regard the large-scale programmes as holding implications mainly for the government schooling system and for the poor, and for primary schools. Since 2000, there have also been more sweeping developments and changes. The development of a National Curriculum Framework and related textbook development have become more noticeable

in the public eye and influence the whole of school education (not only education of the children of the poor/government schools), and revealing deep ideological differences within Indian society and the political character of curriculum-making and curriculum change. The 2000 curriculum favoured Hindutva nationalism with implications not only for history but for science and mathematics, with the inclusion of non-Western contributions and including astrology as a science. The 2005 curriculum attempts not only to undo this “saffronisation” but also to question the persistence of rote, continued fear and failure to be countered by teaching for understanding and meaning-making, providing for “local contexts” and the inclusion of critical perspectives in curricula. The 2009 Right to Education Act has further ushered in changes in evaluation through continuous comprehensive evaluation (CEE), the implications of which are just beginning to be felt in the schooling system.

- 9 These are major developments affecting all strata and stages of school and teacher education. It is useful to remember that the school system in India (including the government, private, and aided schools) is highly differentiated and stratified – not only in terms of its clientele groups, but also in terms of curricular and pedagogic forms. In this complexly differentiated space, the various and varied curricular and pedagogic themes that have been discussed so far, and others that have not been discussed, such as vocationalisation, tribal children’s education, special education, religious learning, heritage crafts and alternative education, can all be found. They not only coexist but also influence and alter each other and use various political, bureaucratic, corporate, religious and civil society levers to influence, engage with, or remain immune from national structures and processes of change or reform. Following the Right to Education Act, we seem to have entered into a period of ideological intensifications that will be decisive for the ability of the Indian state to bring in a national system of education that includes a curriculum and pedagogy. Whether this national system will be homogenising and standardising or supportive of plurality with social justice remains to be seen or imagined.

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