Re-imagining curriculum in India
Charting a path beyond the pandemic

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Curriculum in India: context

- Curriculum in India is embedded in two broad, contesting traditions:
- ➢ the 19th century colonial project of creating an acquiescent people to serve the British Empire, and
- ➢ early 20th century counter movements that envisioned and practiced an emancipatory education aimed at freeing India.
- The colonial approach to curriculum is rooted in a modernist worldview popularised by Bobbitt (1918).
- This view sees curriculum as objectively constructed, valorising efficiency and output.
- It is an anthropocentric view that reinforces the Cartesian nature-culture dualism that placed humans above nature and some peoples and classes above others.

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Curriculum for a free India

- Gandhi, Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo imagined a curriculum for a free India during the anti-colonial struggle.

- Curriculum was viewed as a social, political, and cultural phenomena, with an emphasis on the subjective experience of reality; questioning the assumptions of the imperial and modernist view.

- Curriculum in Gandhi's "Nai Taleem" was an act of "deliberation" to address the needs and concerns of a colonially subjugated society—rather than one based on the "intrinsic view of knowledge" inherent in the modernist-universalist frame of colonial thinking.

- Tagore sought to integrate physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual development, to enable an education that would liberate the self and others.

Curriculum for a free India

- Sri Aurobindo's integral education envisioned the "individual and collective" aim of human life, with the belief that the "free use of our liberty includes also the liberation of others and of mankind"

- Counternarratives to the colonial view of knowledge and practice of education were diverse, including developing an integrated people with a scientific outlook, a rational mind, and self-reliance in an economic, social, and psychological sense.

- This vision of education contained a critique of the narrow individualistic and economic aims of modernity.

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Colonial-feudal nexus

- Associated with an urban (Brahmanical) elite, the colonial curriculum was disengaged from the socio-religious and economic realities of India's feudal, patriarchal, and caste-based society.

- This disconnect created a major void for the masses;

- and a frame of colonial knowledges structured on binaries of tradition vs. modernity and subjective vs. objective

- Policies of the colonial state favoured Brahmanical control of knowledge and the traditional vs. modern binary continued in the post-independence period.

- Brahman intellectuals (including some nationalist leaders) whose status "was enhanced by the colonial regime" did not question these binaries

- Instead used the categorisation of 'Indian tradition' to create norms for colonial rule".

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Coloniality in modernity

- Upper-caste nationalist leaders paid little heed to the contradiction that Ambedkar underlined when India became a republic in 1950:

➢ politically, each vote would have "one value",

➢ socially, the Indian people would continue to struggle to achieve the idea of "one man (person), one value".

- The "modern system of education" was adopted by independent India –a society entrenched in social hierarchy and power.

- Attempts to bring education closer to people and their culture via language, were frustrated during the post-colonial period, disallowing genuine engagement with questions of caste-based structural inequalities that Ambedkar struggled against.

- In this sense, the "modernity" project of independent India enabled, by default, continuity with the project of "coloniality", long after the British left.

Colonial epistemic frame

- The epistemic frame that emphasised "the individual rather than the social goals of education" and established a "link between quality and privilege" continued to shape education in independent India (Naik, 1975).

- Hence, the conception of "curriculum", accorded a much wider meaning and deeper significance during the anti-colonial struggle, was reduced to "selected knowledge", chosen to be transmitted through the textbook.

- The curriculum for preparing schoolteachers, a legacy of the "normal schools" set up during colonial rule, was for the first time redesigned in 2015 with Supreme Court intervention.

- School education remained insular despite decolonised knowledge practices generated in centres of higher education.

Curricular ideas rooted in nationalist and anti-caste discourses

- Curricular ideas rooted in anti-colonial education and anti-caste movements included:

➢issues thrown up by an alienating colonial curriculum and language, concerns of equality and social justice, inner resilience and social responsibility

- These remained outside of colonial frames of knowledge; and failed to attract mainstream academic and policy engagement.

- India's first education policy (1968) ignored some of the most critical recommendations of the National Education Commission (GoI 1966) towards this aim

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Repositioning curricular knowledge

- In the second decade of neoliberal reforms (2000s), educators repositioned curricular knowledge to sustain the constitution-led vision of education towards equity and social justice.

- With a change in the political regime, more recent neoliberal policies succeeded in severing processes of teaching and learning from curricular concerns of equity and social justice.

- Questions of curriculum, linguistic and social diversity in classrooms, locating learning in social-cultural contexts, and developing teachers' professional repertoires and agency to bring about social transformation are no longer central to the education policy discourse.

Dominant curricular practices

- Dominant international and national education discourses, continue to view curriculum from the perspective of employability and economic growth.

- This is evident in the state response to the Covid-19 pandemic that led to the closure of all educational institutions since March, 2020.

- The pandemic has laid bare structural problems of massive income and wealth inequalities, infrastructure inequalities, ecological damage, and the impacts of climate change.

- We have witnessed middle class-led state apathy towards the injustices that the poorest,

- and a quiescence to totalitarian ideas of governance that seek to control the everyday lives of people.

Inequality crisis made visible by the pandemic

- The pandemic has made visible blatant economic, health, caste-based, gender, and educational inequalities that face the poor, the homeless, socially disadvantaged, migrants, refugees, and those in informal settlements.

- Currently, India's top 10 percent hold as much wealth as the bottom 70 percent and India's private companies are almost exclusively upper caste-owned.

- The richest 1 percent has four times the wealth of the bottom 70 percent, via a takeover and monetization of land, waters, forests and resources that were the lifeblood of those at the bottom end of the caste spectrum.

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Inequality crisis made visible by the pandemic

- The impact of the stringent lockdown, announced by the government four hours before enforcement started (at midnight on 24th March 2020), is being borne by the Adivasi, Dalit, and "backward" castes of India.

- These are the "footloose" millions, who keep India's workshops and factories running, toil on roads and construction sites, service the homes of the rich and middle classes, care for their children, and keep the city clean.

- The pandemic has uncovered the fragile existence of hundreds of millions of Indians and the abysmal capacity of public and formal systems to respond in sustainable ways.

- It has brought to the surface the wider structural dynamics and inequities that reinforce each other during crises and differentially impact communities, regions, and institutions.

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Magnitude of the crisis

- About half of India's urban population are migrants.

- Rural to urban migrants concentrate in over 53 million urban agglomerations that are home to 140 million people out of 377 million in India's cities.

- They face severe everyday challenges - inadequate housing, low wages, insecure and hazardous work, lack of identity and proof of residence, exclusion from state-provided health and education services, and discrimination based on ethnicity, caste, religion, class, and gender.

- They remain excluded from the economic, cultural, social, and political life of the city they inhabit and nurture.

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State response

- State response has been one of coercion, policing, and imposition of nontransparent surveillance measures to enforce compliance with the lockdown treated like a curfew.

- Several state governments initiated the suspension of major labour laws followed by a Gazette Notification (MoLE 2020) that effectively takes away their fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

- Kerala is an exceptional story of success in dealing with both the pandemic and migrants with compassion and efficiency.

- As economic activity came to a grinding halt, the vast majority of workers were left to fend for themselves.

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Caste pandemic

- Covid-19 is resurrecting the worst excesses of India's casteist past

- The experience of being a Dalit "bring(s) the phenomenon of 'social distancing' as part of a caste pandemic rather than the corona pandemic to many of us" (Dadhwal, 2020).

- This prompts us to reflect on why Ambedkar's unfinished campaign against the caste system was so crucial to India's freedom, and

- to problematise the caste question as a curricular response to the inequality crisis that the pandemic has laid bare.

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Questioning modernity

- The pandemic has demolished popular perceptions of modernity—notion of human supremacy over nature and its belief in the power to predict, control, and establish order.

- Existential challenges thrown up by the pandemic need to be seen as opportunities to revisit the most critical and significant values/sensibilities that ought to become the basic foundations for policies and activities.

- Several concerned citizens and organisations are giving voice to the large number of migrants who walked back to their villages as the city rejected them, snatched livelihood and means of basic survival.

- How do we create a socially just and compassionate society? What are the associated epistemologies that can support and accelerate these transformations?

Using the pandemic to institute new forms of exclusion

- The Pandemic has led to a coalition of interests to exercise brute state power.

- The closure of educational institutions has impacted more than 320 million school, college, and university students in India.

- The lockdown has been used by the Government to push for digitalizing education amidst high economic and social inequality and poor learning.

- Only 27 percent urban and 5 percent rural Indian households with students have internet access at home.

- The digital divide is stark, intersects with economic inequality; is likely to leave a large number of children out of learning opportunities.

Using the pandemic for profit-making

- Yet, technocrats are looking at this as business opportunities, for "incentivizing for-profit companies to develop products for the underserved communities" (CSF, 2020).

- Projecting online learning as the future of school and higher education is in consonance with India's National Education Policy (GoI, 2020);

- and is positioned as a means to increase India's gross enrolment ratio in higher education.

- Several non-state actors have had a considerable agenda-setting influence in this space, as they work closely with central and state governments on behalf of global advocacy networks.

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Envisioning curriculum rooted in equality, social justice, and gender justice

- Epistemological and ontological questions have been central in engaging with issues of social inequality and the deep structural contradictions of the Anthropocene.

- Debates around educational access, process, and justice are more than a century old in India.

- They were closely linked with anti-colonial and anti-caste struggles against economic, social and gender injustice, and associated contests with colonial, imperial, and some Enlightenment epistemologies.

- The discourse of anti-caste struggles rested on ideas of transformative education. Phule, for instance, reimagined education as the *Trutiya Ratna* (third eye) that has "the possibilities to enable the oppressed to understand and transform the relation between power and knowledge"

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Missing epistemic link with anti-caste discourses

- The discourse of anti-caste struggles predated the nationalist discourse that led to the freedom movement.
- Yet, anti-caste discourses were kept out of the nationalist discourse that led to counter movements, in a bid to consolidate India's freedom struggle.
- This led to pitting 'modern' ideas of education against the "traditional".
- The inclusion of anti-caste discourse was seen by several nationalist leaders to weaken the anti-colonial political struggle for a free India.
- Curriculum was envisioned as a process of learners' engagement with nature, self, and their social milieu, but without confronting the caste- and gender-based fault lines of Indian society.
- The 20th-century anti-colonial struggle for India's independence missed making any real epistemic connection with anti-caste discourses.

Democratising method of knowledge

- While for Gandhi, swaraj was about breaking the shackles of colonial rule and of oneself, Ambedkar's idea of freedom was about liberating the oppressed via a commitment to social equality.

- Ambedkar was deeply influenced by Phule and Dewey. Hence, for him democracy was a form of "associated living", central to which are ideas of equality and fraternity.

- Both Phule and Ambedkar underlined 'situated knowledge' as critical to understand and transform the relationship between knowledge and power.

- For both, the democratisation of the method of knowledge includes seeking the integration of "the principles of *prajna* (critical understanding) with *karuna* (empathetic love) and *samata* (equality)" (Rege, 2010).

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Conflict as key to social transformation

- The discourse of anti-caste struggles, and hence engagement with questions of equity and justice, was left out of the curriculum.

- Building upon the knowledges and experiences of students from diverse social backgrounds enables engagement with conflict, as well as reimagining pedagogic processes that help re-examine major "canons" of the disciplines taught (Rege, 2010).

- The "absence of conflict" within curriculum has been viewed by several scholars as leading to political quiescence (Apple 1971), fostering cognitive passivity (Kincheloe 1993) and suppressing history (Giroux 1981).

- Hence, conflict needs to be seen as a fundamental element of a social transformation framework, and as a major source of social change and innovation (Paraskeva, 2011).

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Foregrounding subjective positions

- Gender and caste, for instance, have been typically absent as categories of analysis in mainstream disciplines and in their practices of canonization (Rege 2010).

- The persistent exclusion of the "experience of caste" and the lived realities of diversity and marginalization maintains the "universalistic" nature of the Indian educational discourse.

- The particularistic nature of the Dalit discourse creates the possibility of challenging the "logic of exclusion" embedded in a discourse of binaries (Rege, 2007).

- As a "collective subject position", the feminist or Dalit standpoint offers critical frames of reference to create counter curricular narratives (Rege 2000).

- A curriculum that enables dialogue around intersectionality and social tensions is likely to allow constructive critique of dominant epistemological positions and theorization from the field.

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Curriculum as social dialogue

- Curriculum thus forms part of a society at a specific moment in its history, and it is therefore imbued with cultural, social, and historical meaning.

- As a logical, rational tool of dialogue, curriculum can negotiate spaces that lie between the local and the universal, the contextualised and the decontextualized, and the intrinsic and the extrinsic.

- It is this "flexibility that allows curriculum to become both a tool of social dialogue and a means of adapting educational systems to dynamic societies" (Jonnaert and Therriault 2013);

- Enabling social equality and social justice to become viable aims of education, even though it cannot do so alone.

Bridging the ontological-epistemological gap

- There is a developing international discourse around the need to "reject learning systems that alienate individuals and social practices that divide and dehumanize people";

- and to rethink learning approaches that can enable "greater justice, social equity and global solidarity" (UNESCO 2015).

- It would be critical to examine how institutionalised patriarchy, protectionism, and the upsurge in racist and casteist behaviour across societies are perpetuated through school and higher education curricula and institutional arrangements.

- This could help bridge the ontological–epistemological gap that often characterises formal knowledge, especially in areas of contest like caste, gender, and the environment.

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Problematizing the anthropocentric framing of curriculum

- Environmental justice in India is closely linked to the lives and livelihoods of forest dwelling, fishing, pastoral, and agricultural communities.

- Communities have lived in harmony with local ecosystems, based on practices and ways of knowing that had been adapted and tested over time (Gadgil and Guha 2012).

- Modernisation, and its associated epistemologies and curricula, have effectively re-engineered and re-arranged this world by privileging particular values, livelihoods, and social hierarchies.

- In spite of the expansion of scientific research, environmental activism, popular education, and people's movements around the environment, there is limited permeation of this discourse into mainstream curricula.

- It is no surprise, therefore, that the period of the Covid-19 lockdown has been seized as an opportunity to dilute a large number of environmental legislations, to the detriment of the poor and vulnerable.

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Re-examining the role of education

- A critical question for and in education relates to how education (in terms of knowledge, its applications, and its formal arrangements) has contributed to ecological imbalance and the socio-economic inequalities that many "modern" societies are based on.

- Environmentalists have called out the dominance of traditional subject knowledge in schools as "a legacy of the eighteenth century conception of knowledge...grounded in the idea of the universal applicability of reason and in the instrumental nature of rationality" (Tasker 2004).

- Direct engagement with the environment is seen as "fundamental to learning, and schools need to be embedded in the local community so that learning tasks can emerge out of real life contexts".

- This approach has largely been ignored by mainstream education, which focuses on changing 'human behavior' to create more efficient and productive economic systems.

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Epistemological questions in the pluriverse

- Several theorists questioning Eurocentric universalism are of the view that the world we live in is a pluriverse—it is inherently pluralistic.

- Since modern science and technology…no longer seem able to devise workable solutions to the environmental crisis, epistemological questions (and not policy alone) are fundamental in discussing questions about nature (Escobar 2008).

- This compels us to look at the cultural roots of informal education— self-directed learning—typically part of several communities in India and elsewhere, amongst agrarian communities, artisans, weavers, crafts people.

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Struggle against epistemicides

- Deconstructing Western thought from within is critical.
- It is also important to engage with the struggle against epistemicides (Paraskeva, 2011), that "seeks non-hegemonic epistemological (and ontological) grounding" (Snaza et al. 2014).
- It would be essential to situate this within the economic, social, gender, and ecological fault lines that have opened across societies following the pandemic.
- "Climate and environmental justice cannot be achieved" without tackling "social and racial injustices and oppression" (Neubauer et al. 2020).
- In India, this is linked to a two-century-long resistance to political and epistemic colonisation, punctuated by a mid-20th century Constitutional settlement.

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The Indian Constitution as a way ahead

- The framing of the Constitution of India (1947–1950) was the culmination of a more than century-long struggle for political rights linked to economic, social, and gender justice.

- A number of unresolved questions around educational and environmental justice were inserted via multiple Constitutional amendments between 1976–2009.

- This document provides the ontological and epistemological foundations to transition from a deeply hierarchical and exclusionary economic and social order and one with little sensitivity to the planet and other species.

- It could help us chart a way ahead to a more inclusive, egalitarian, and sustainable society, echoed weakly in recent global political frames such as the SDGs.

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Constitution-led curricular vision

- India's national curricular documents for school and teacher education, along with the Right to Education, provide an epistemic frame that challenges the overt and hidden colonial and post-colonial curricula rooted in "modernity".

- The framework led to a re-imagination of school curriculum that integrates diverse disciplinary knowledges to engage students with key concerns of the everyday citizen; with the aim:

- "not to produce accomplished test-takers…efficient and docile employees…[but] to help us think and act with intelligence, sensitivity and courage in both the public sphere—as citizens aspiring to establish a democratic society—and in the private sphere, as individuals committed to other individuals" (Pinar, 2004).

Constitution-led curricular vision

- Teacher education programmes were designed to foreground conflicts and dilemmas in a manner that allows participants to empathise, appreciate diversity, and accept difference.

- As argued by Maturana and Varela (1987), "Conflict can go away only if we move to another domain where co-existence takes place".

- A deeper journey into the inner self and its relationship with the wider social and natural world has to begin with the opening of the mind, examining and challenging power equations and hierarchies, as well as obstacles that resist change.

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Revisiting 'What knowledge is most worth'?

- The current pandemic compels us to construct a relevant curricular response—one that helps address the question "what knowledge has the most worth?" anew.

- Post-humanism could be a way to bring together seemingly disparate critical approaches (feminist, anticolonial, anti-caste and antiracist thought, technology studies, and ecology) to challenge the ways that humanism has restricted politics and education.

- Curriculum has typically been viewed as a tool for regulating and adapting educational systems to society's needs and trends.

- Curriculum in India has been viewed as an act of "deliberation" rather than one based on "an intrinsic worth of knowledge" (Kumar 2004; Batra 2015).

Imagining curricular rooted in equality and social justice

- The present health crisis implores us to rethink the meanings and purposes of education and how they can be woven in curricula and pedagogic communication.

- A curricular response to the stark realities of inequality and social injustice, would include cognizing the significance of subaltern disciplines and imagining transformative pedagogies that can help reclaim education spaces and sustain epistemic justice.

- The most critical question that confronts us today is how we can engender a society that helps us reconnect with ourselves, with each other, and the pluriverse;

- helps us overcome our fears, insecurities that have made us passive and politically quiescence; and help develop a sense of solidarity, fraternity, and social justice with compassion and empathy.

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