

Knowledge, Decolonised Mind and Higher Education: Negotiating Indian Knowledge System in the National Education Policy, 2020

Dr Vineeth R.S.¹, Sunil Kumar P.M²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of History, NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry

²Assistant Professor, Department of History, NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry

Writing way back in the 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay, a member of the then Supreme Council of Governor General in India between 1834 and 1838, wrote that;

“It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy, the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same.” (Macaulay, 1835)

One need not be amazed to read what Macaulay, or his contemporaries, wrote on India. On the contrary, we must recognise that most European writings on India, and for that matter, Africa, demonstrate a parallel dichotomy of syncretism. In this schema of syncretism, India appears as the Dark Continent of the East, devoid of any progress, urbanisation and civilisation that the industrialised Western Europe looked at with compassion. Therefore, it is not surprising that Macaulay rejected everything Indian, even by underestimating the entire structure of Indian knowledge. Instead of being stunned or blaming the lacuna of European openness, what one may locate is the way in which the European perceptions were constructed. For an average, educated European of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, India appeared to be a world of fantasy, in which two important periods converged. First, the European success in establishing an Enlightenment social order, coupled with positivism and the Industrial Revolution, made it possible for European hegemony to emerge (Cohn 2009, 20). Second, the diffusion of Whiteman's supremacy, that Europe was the centre of civilisation, constructed the barbaric image of the colonised, where the White Western society appeared omnipotent.

It is not very comforting that this white supremacy continued throughout the colonial era. Another fact that we must also understand is that the colonial occupation, which lasted for almost two hundred years, has created a European perspective in us, and that is not something that can be changed very quickly. As Fanon said, the reason why we have to live as the ‘wretched of the earth’ is because of our submission to colonial knowledge (Fanon, 1963). That is, one can only become part of the decolonisation process by critically approaching the politics of colonial knowledge production. It is essential to recognise that decolonisation is not merely a political process, but has a much broader epistemological significance.

Based on this hypothesis, the present article examines the question of whether the alternative epistemological system, as emphasised in the National Education Policy, can

provide an alternative framework for education in India. This article problematises the politics of knowledge by examining how the policies outlined in the National Education Policy 2020, particularly the Indian Knowledge System, offer an alternative to the Western-centric field of knowledge construction. To address this, the paper presents a study of the main aspects and objectives of the National Education Policy, 2020, from a socio-historical comparative perspective, employing a critical pedagogical methodology.

Colonial and (not very) Post-colonial Initiatives

As scholars argue, the English East India Company was deeply concerned with the progress of colonialism, as well as the means of eliminating any obstacles that might hinder its advancement (Frenz 2004, 46). At the same time, it was not easy for the company to convince the British people of the need for a mercantile entrepreneurship to govern India. While pushing forward the agenda of colonisation, which, the company realised, demanded an affirmative mask, civilisation was projected upfront of colonial subjugation. Slowly, scholarly attention was subsequently focused on the objective of a civilising mission and transforming Indian education into a suitable form for negotiating the future British Raj. The first step in this was the Minutes of Maccalay.

Thomas Babington Maccalay came to India in June 1834 as the law member of the Governor General's Executive Council. Soon, he was appointed the President of the Committee of Public Instruction, and we don't know whether he had any awareness of becoming the founder of Macaulayism in India (Kopf, 1969). Maccalay was an Anglican by choice and did not see much value in the Orientalist ideas that Indian literature, culture, and languages should be promoted, and that some of them contained wisdom. For him, it was only desirable to organise education in a way that would help the survival of the British Empire, and to pay for that kind of education. Therefore, it was essential for him to denigrate Indian culture and education and praise British education maximally. Macaulay's ministrations were seen as a means to achieve this goal, and his now infamous minutes, once an officially recognised document, was submitted in February to the Council headed by William Bentick who passed it in March 1835. The minutes, which brought together all the elements of an English-centred education, laid the foundation for modern English education in India and paved the way for the elimination of India-centric knowledge production. For instance, Minutes recommended that;

1. That the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and Science amongst the natives of India that "all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone.
2. "The Government Funds were not to be spent on the printing of oriental works".
3. "All the funds at the disposal of the Government would be henceforth be spent in imparting to the Indians a knowledge of English literature and Science".

It demonstrates an extreme admiration for European culture and the English language, as well as a strong sense that they are the only perfect knowledge system. However, the suggestion that Indian knowledge should not be promoted and that there should be no financial support for its publication is a clear indication of the colonial supremacy of the nineteenth century. The fact that scholar-administrator like Maccalay could not accept Indian knowledge

was not based on any scientific understanding on the quality of Indian knowledge systems. At the time Macaulay was advocating for English education, a significant amount of research on Indian knowledge systems was also being conducted in Europe and India. Although these early studies were influenced by colonial-racial science, they were not entirely dismissive of India. For instance, Henry Thomas Colebrook wrote fearlessly that ‘we must not then indiscriminately condemn the whole literature of India’ (Colebrook 1858, 64). Colebrooke’s magnum opus, ‘Essays and the Philosophy of the Hindus,’ stands as a testimony to Europe’s recognition of Indian knowledge.

One of the proposals in the field of education, after the implementation of the Macaulay’s minutes, was put forward by James Thomson, the Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Provinces (1843-1853). Thomson attempted to disseminate English knowledge through vernacular languages and also sought to expand the number of schools. However, unlike Macaulay, Thomson’s interventions were not based on a significant ideology. The Wood’s Despatch of 1854 was created to bridge this gap and promote a conceptually concrete Western education in India. The Despatch was ratified by the Despatch of Lord Stanley (Earl of Derby) in 1859, especially in the context of the first battle of independence. It is also noteworthy that Wood’s Despatch promoted female education and instituted a hierarchical order in school education. While the Despatch recommended governmental control over schools and a secular approach, this document also contained specific sectarian interests under the guise of a secular education. For example, the Despatch argued that, “....Christians of all denominations to guide the natives of India in the way of religious truth, and to instruct uncivilized races, such as those found in Assam, in the Cossya, Garrow, and Rajmehar hills, and in various districts of Central and Southern India (who are in the lowest “condition of ignorance, and are either wholly without a religion, or are the slaves of a degrading and barbarous superstition), have been accompanied.....” (The Wood’s Despatch 1854, 22). While such a position would favour Christian interests in education, the arguments that the customs existing among the various tribes or Dalits in many parts of India were different from Hinduism and therefore barbaric were exhausting.

Following Woods’ Despatch, various interventions have been made in the field of education. Of course, the 1857 rebellion had been a severe blow to the continuation of British policies, and it deterred the British rulers from interfering in Indian education. After the uprising of 1857, various initiatives such as the Bethune School (1849), Hunter Commission (1882), Raleigh Commission (1902), Indian Universities Act (1904), Government Resolution on Education Policy (1913), Sadler Commission (1917-1919), Hartog Committee (1929), Sargent Plan of Education (1944) were implemented in Indian education. Still, there was no significant departure from the Eurocentric model, and these commissions focused on further strengthening the modern education already established in India. Therefore, it can be seen that the ideological dominance achieved by Anglicists in the Indian education sector under the leadership of the nineteenth century persisted until 1947.

Post-Colonial Policy Initiatives

One of the first steps to formulate a national policy on education was the Kothari Commission. The Indian Education Commission, also known as the Kothari Commission,

headed by D.S. Kothari, was constituted in 1964 to formulate a national education policy. The National Education Policy of 1968 was formulated based on the recommendations of the Kothari Commission. Kothari commission submitted its recommendations to bring Indian education up to world standards, in line with the changing world order, and create an educational revolution in India. In its opening paragraph the Kothari Commission noted that, “the destiny of India is now being shaped in her classrooms. In a world based on science and technology, it is education that determines the level of prosperity, welfare and security of people. On the quality and number of persons coming out of our schools and colleges will depend our success in the great enterprise of national reconstruction whose principal objective is to raise the standard of living of our people” (Report of the Education Commission 1964-66. Vol. 1). The government formulated the National Policy on Education in 1968, based on the recommendations of the Kothari Commission Report. The National Policy on Education recommended,

- (i) Compulsory education for all between the ages of 6 and 14
- (ii) Development of regional languages
- (iii) English medium education, and use of Hindi as a national language.
- (iv) Encourage the study of Sanskrit

The Kothari Commission Report was followed by new policies formulated in subsequent years (1979, 1986, 1992), and decisions were made to improve the quality of Indian education. However, an important fact to note is that, until the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020, our education system remained a relic of the British colonial era. Of course, timely changes were made to these policies, and suggestions were made to make education more accessible and popular. However, it should be noted that the change in basic policies was not immediately evident. The reason for this is that the education policies in place until 2020 focused on bringing about a silent revolution through education, treating India as an outside entity. However, the National Education Policy 2020 proposes a fundamental understanding of Indian education, rather than looking at India from the outside.

IKS: Whither A Radical Turn?

It has already been observed that the National Education Policy 2020, introduced by the BJP-led NDA government, emphasises radical reform of the Indian education sector and a shift away from Macaulayism. NEP, 2020 suggest to implement the Indian Knowledge System (hereafter IKS), as an attempt to promote indigenous, value-based education. The allegations against IKS, that it promotes Gurukula system and brahmanical agenda to eliminate pluralism do not warrant serious concern. In fact, the guidelines on IKS demonstrate that it is not intended to secure sectarian goals through education. Instead, the basic principle of IKS, as the guidelines show, is a concern for Indian epistemological traditions and that they should not be lost. Moreover, IKS wholeheartedly accepts the pluralistic elements of Indian knowledge. The National Education Policy, 2020 argues that;

“Knowledge of India” will include knowledge from ancient India and its contributions to modern India and its successes and challenges, and a clear sense of India’s future aspirations with regard to education, health, environment, etc. These elements will be incorporated in an

accurate and scientific manner throughout the school curriculum wherever relevant; in particular, Indian Knowledge Systems, including tribal knowledge and indigenous and traditional ways of learning, will be covered and included in mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, yoga, architecture, medicine, agriculture, engineering, linguistics, literature, sports, games, as well as in governance, polity, conservation. Specific courses in tribal ethno-medicinal practices, forest management, traditional (organic) crop cultivation, natural farming, etc. will also be made available. An engaging course on Indian Knowledge Systems will also be available to students in secondary school as an elective. Competitions may be held in schools for learning various topics and subjects through fun and indigenous games. Video documentaries on inspirational luminaries of India, ancient and modern, in science and beyond, will be shown at appropriate points throughout the school curriculum. Students will be encouraged to visit different States as part of cultural exchange programmes. (NEP, 2020)

The above paragraph indicates that IKS proposes a holistic approach to understand the entire knowledge systems of India. The framework of IKS also suggests that the concept of Indian Knowledge Systems requires deconstruction for a comprehensive understanding, approach, and conceptualisation. This is mandatory as IKS does not suggest that it is concerned about the knowledge of a particular group at any specific time. Instead, IKS refers to all the knowledge that has developed in the Indian subcontinent over approximately 5,000 years. In the IKS, 'Indian' must be understood as a combination of spatial, social, and politico-cultural continuation of various systems over the last 4000-5000 years. While calling for a pan-Indian knowledge system, IKS also recognises the changed political geography of the Indian subcontinent. To put it differently, IKS does not locate knowledge in a particular place, but rather as a continuing cultural symbol of human interaction and progress. For IKS, it does not matter that the Harappan knowledge of urban planning now belongs to Pakistan, but there is no doubt that it has also been ingrained in the Indian soil.

Similarly, the birthplace of Buddhism is currently located in Nepal, but the cultural atmosphere of Buddhism, and its knowledge continue to shape contemporary India as well. Similarly, many inventions developed by ancient scholars have been further advanced by Western scholars in later times. For example, we do not know much about the contributions of Indian mathematicians to the subject. James Lovelock, a chemist, and Lynn Margulis, a microbiologist, developed the Gaia hypothesis in the 1970s (Margulis and Sagan, 1997). It argues that the earth, as a whole, is a living organism, but similar concepts appear in many Indian writings. In addition, a survey of the history of India would prove the existence of ancient treatises on philosophy, architecture, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, metrics, sociology, economy and polity, ethics, geography, logic, military science, weaponry, agriculture, mining, trade and commerce, metallurgy, mining, shipbuilding, medicine, poetics, biology and veterinary science and so on. However, IKS do not mean ancient alone. Instead, IKS refer to the formation, development, dissemination, and resurfacing of knowledge systems to date. It is so because two forms of historical movements shape IKS.

On the one hand, the influx of various scholars, travellers, and people influenced and shaped IKS. On the other hand, as we know, India has been an open ground for human migration since ancient times. This migration brought new knowledge patterns in every field

and produced responses from indigenous cultures, creating new knowledge systems. These new movements ultimately resulted in the creation of a mixed, plural form of Knowledge systems in India. So, we cannot say that there is an IKS. Instead, there are multiple IKS, plural, fluid, and dynamic, and they are the products of historical processes spanning thousands of years.

This also leads us to conceptualise the character of knowledge as proposed in IKS. In IKS, knowledge means any form of information/ technicality/expertise, etc, that is produced/ discovered/invented/used. There are also elements of traditional knowledge or specific knowledge systems peculiar to the Indian tradition. Of course, it is challenging to define tradition, but it could be assumed that traditional knowledge systems are unique in their character. For instance, the Siddha tradition predates the Sangam era. How to preserve this uniqueness and whether it needs to be preserved at all, are things that can only be said after new studies. However, of course, we also need to be aware of some of the challenges IKSs face. If it were the need of one section of the colonisation to demote the IKS, some attempts to continue it would challenge the social balance of India as a nation. For example, examine the theory of the Aryan invasion. It is generally accepted today that the Aryan invasion theory was a political strategy during the 19th century (Lorenzen, 2006). Similarly, the notion that the word Hindu is a contribution of the Arabs. Arab contact since the eighth century has certainly nurtured Indian culture. However, the idea that the Arabs gave the term Hindu needs to be re-examined. The travelogues of Chinese travellers who entered India before the 7th century are noteworthy here. Thus, Alexander Cunningham writes, "India was first known to the Chinese in the time of the Emperor Wuti, of the later Han dynasty, in the second century before Christ. It was then called Yuan-tu or Yin-tu, that is, Hindu, and Shi-tu, or Sindhu". (Cunningham 1871,9) Similarly, we enthusiastically endorse the many colonial maxims that even sarcastically abuse our heritage. For instance, how do we respond when we read that Chanakya, the author of Arthashastra, is also known as the Indian Machiavelli, and Kalidasa is regarded as the Indian Shakespeare? While these terminologies reproduce colonial notions of India, we tend to accept them, forgetting the heritage of the IKS. The internal feud of Indian systems, caste differences, and schisms are all there, but that is not the end of our heritage.

Now that we have understood what IKS are and how they are constructed. Also, let us see how IKS can be approached as a cognitive domain. Of course, since we are all proud of our heritage, we can romanticise IKS if we want to do so. However, such an approach tends to discourage open, critical readings of the IKS and relegate them to a crystallised state. Therefore, the concept of uncritical IKS is not desirable. Another approach is to reject IKS altogether and assume they are all part of a romanticising history. However, like the first position, it is pretty childish. Ultimately, the IKS is the product of millions of our ancestors who dedicated their lives to seeking and fine-tuning their respective fields of knowledge. That means we are the custodians of this knowledge, but we have the responsibility to pass it on to future generations. As members of a civilisation which stands like a grand banyan tree with thousands of leaves, we have the IKS. Our choice is to select the best from it, nurture, protect, and water it for our future generations. Therefore, we must use India's socially relevant, situation-specific, affirmative knowledge systems for our social and national purposes.

Concluding Remarks

One of the challenges that the Indian tradition faces is the academic ambience in India that ridicules everything Indian, often for no reason. A large number of post-colonial scholars take a very critical position on Indian traditions arguing that it is basically Brahmanical, unscientific and so forth. In fact, the reality is that our ancient epistemologies have been overshadowed by the pursuit of scientific education and Western secular education. Therefore, IKS studies indicate that there is a significant difference between the Indian knowledge in history and the Indian knowledge in reality.

In line with the above policy, the aim of the Indian Knowledge System is not to promote primitive thought, as critics have alleged. Instead, IKS emphasises that India has never opposed any field of knowledge and has consistently welcomed all knowledge. Therefore, IKS is committed to openly passing on to the new generation the fields of knowledge that have been formed here since ancient times. In short, IKS, which preserves Indian knowledge and is subject to rigorous studies, will accelerate India's transformation from a Eurocentric world.

References

1. Aggarwal, J.C. 1993. Landmarks in the History of Modern Indian Education. Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi.
2. Alexander Cunningham. 1871. The Ancient Geography of India. Trubner and Co. London.
3. Basu, Aparna. 1979. The Growth of Education and Political Development in India: 1893-1920. Oxford University Press. Delhi.
4. Basu, Aparna. 1982. Essays in the Policies of Indian Education. Concept Publishing Company. New Delhi.
5. Chaube, S.P. 1988. History and Problems of Indian Education. Vinod Pustak Mandir. Agra.
6. Cohn, Theodore. H. 2009. Global Political Economy: Theory and Practice. Pearson. Delhi.
7. Fanon, Frantz. 1963. Wretched of the Earth. New York. Grove Press.
8. Frenz, Margret. 2004. *A Race of Monsters: South India and the British 'Civilizing Mission' in the Later Eighteenth Century* in Fischer, Harald and Mann, Michael (eds) Colonialism as a Civilizing Mission: Cultural: Ideology in British India. Anthem Press. London.
9. Ghosh, S. C. 1987. Education Policy in India since Warren Hastings. Nav Prakash. Calcutta.
10. Haddad, W.D. & Demsky, T. 1994. The Dynamics of Education Policy Making. The World Bank. Washington D.C.
11. Kopf, David 1969 *Macaulayism and the Defeat of the Orientalists* in British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835. University of California Press. California.
12. Lorenzen, David N. 2006. *Who invented Hinduism?*. Yoda Press. New Delhi.
13. Margulis, Lynn and Sagan, Dorion. 1997. Slanted Truths: Essays on Gaia, Symbiosis and Evolution. Springer. New York.
14. National Education Policy, 2020. URL: <https://share.google/Ex4cDw5iMxCzfIMtN>
15. Report of the Education Commission 1964-66. Vol. 1. URL: <https://indianculture.gov.in/reports-proceedings/report-education-commission-1964-66>
16. The Wood's Despatch, 1854.