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

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Abstract The Covid-19 pandemic has made visible the sharp economic, health, caste-based, gender, and educational inequalities that the disadvantaged face in India. Curriculum is ordinarily viewed as a tool for regulating and adapting modern educational systems to society’s needs and trends. But most governments have been unwilling to rethink post-pandemic education, despite the loss of livelihoods, food, and shelter – accentuated by educational inequality and institutionalised via neoliberal reforms. The current pandemic compels us to examine the meanings and purposes of education from a socio-historical perspective, to understand how questions of equity and justice, rooted in India’s Constitution, can be woven into curricula and pedagogic approaches. This article reflects on the role that curriculum can play in enabling an ecologically and socially just and connected world. This curricular response includes cognising the significance of subaltern disciplines and imagining transformative pedagogies that can help reclaim education spaces and sustain epistemic justice.

Keywords Curriculum · Inequality · Caste · Social and epistemic justice · Pandemic · India

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 from the shackles of colonial rule. The colonial approach to curriculum, rooted in a modernist worldview popularised by Bobbitt (1918), views it as objectively constructed, valorising efficiency and output. Inherent to this is an anthropocentric view that accords value and agency to particular sets of humans. This view reinforces the...
Cartesian nature-culture dualism that placed humans above nature and some peoples and classes above others.

A reimagining of curriculum for a free India—what must be taught, why and how—was proposed by Gandhi, Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo. They questioned basic assumptions of the imperial and modernist view. Early post-colonial approaches viewed curriculum as a social, political, and cultural phenomena, with an emphasis on the subjective experience of reality. A more recent, post-humanist view seeks to blur the boundaries between human, other species, and technology, rejecting past formulations based on multiple dichotomies and consequent institutionalised inequalities.

Based on the principles of social and economic equality, and equality of educational opportunity, Gandhi’s “Nai Taleem” focused on bringing work and education together. It was a response to an elite system of colonial education that was perceived to be culturally and economically irrelevant. The curriculum was to be an act of “deliberation”—addressing the immediate 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 (Batra 2015, p. 36).

Tagore’s education vision is seeded in Santiniketan, where nature was the chief teacher and children enjoyed freedom and a deep bond with their educators. Tagore sought to integrate physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual development, to enable an education that would liberate the self and others (Lal 1932). Embracing modernity, Tagore initiated loka-siksha—a movement to popularise science amongst the masses. His endorsement of western science and associated modernity was to become a cornerstone of formal education in independent India, but without the integration he was seeking. Sri Aurobindo’s integral education was envisioned to develop the young towards the “true aim of human life (which) is both individual and collective”, for the “individual exists not in himself alone but in the collectivity…the free use of our liberty includes also the liberation of others and of mankind” (2002, p.14).

After the transfer of education to the control of provincial governments, the purpose of education offered in institutions supported by nationalist leaders was to enable young minds to develop a national imaginary of a free people and society, in an independent India. The 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. The “indigenous principle” was about “forging a link between the outer material reality with the inner capacity to reflect and develop insight” (Pinar 2015, p. 166).

The colonial curriculum, strongly associated with an urban elite, was disengaged from the socio-religious and economic realities of India’s feudal, patriarchal, and caste-based society. This disconnect created a major void, especially for the masses who could not resonate with modernist-universalist frames of colonial thinking. Yet, nationalist leaders, with limited interest in educating the masses, did not question colonial knowledges structured on binaries such as tradition vs. modernity and subjective vs. objective. As a result, the policies of the colonial state that favoured Brahmanical control of knowledge (Rege 2010; Sinha 2017) faced little resistance and the traditional vs. modern binary continued in the post-independence period. This, argues Rege (2010, p. 92), represents a continuity of the role of some Brahman intellectuals whose status “was enhanced by the colonial regime that used the classification and categorisation of ‘Indian tradition’ to create norms for colonial rule”.

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Most 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”, while socially the Indian people continued to struggle to achieve the idea of “one man, one value”. The “modern system of education” adopted by independent India, which eulogised decontextualized universal frames of knowledge, was embedded within a society entrenched in social hierarchy and power. Several attempts to bring education closer to people and their culture via language, as well as to enhance social and psychological access, were frustrated during the post-colonial period. This disallowed genuine engagement with questions of structural inequalities in the caste-ridden society that Ambedkar struggled against, but which colonial education had succeeded in cementing. In this sense, the “modernity” project of independent India enabled, by default, continuity with the project of “coloniality”, long after the British left (Batra 2020a, p. 5).

The colonial epistemic frame that favoured Brahmanical hegemony was left untested, despite initial post-colonial attempts to link quality education with ideas of social equity and justice. The British emphasis on “the individual rather than the social goals of education” served colonial interests, while the “link between quality and privilege” established by colonial education (Naik 1975, p. 46) continued to shape education in India, well after independence. In this frame, a modernist-universalist curriculum with its connotations and promise of development and progress acquired the status of “modern education”. Hence, the conception of “curriculum”, which was accorded a much wider meaning and deeper significance during the anti-colonial struggle, was reduced to “selected knowledge”, chosen to be transmitted to students through the textbook. Colonial approaches to education succeeded in establishing a culture of textbooks and examinations in Indian schools. Even today, the textbook constitutes the most important tool to transmit curricular content, though it is also the most criticized and controversial aspect of India’s education system. Criticism has ranged from perceiving the textbook as a passive medium of curriculum transaction, one often loaded with information and developmentally inappropriate concepts that stretch beyond the capacities of children, to highlighting texts ridden with stereotypes, prejudices with caste, class, community, language, and even religious overtones (Batra 2019a). Nevertheless, textbooks are seen as the authoritative source of knowledge for the teacher and student alike.

Deep colonial roots of the modern education system resisted change, even as post-colonial India attempted to decolonise knowledge practices via centres of higher education. 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. Thus, curricular ideas rooted in anti-colonial education and anti-caste movements remained outside of mainstream colonial frames of knowledge. These included the means to develop inner resilience and social responsibility, question hierarchies, interrogate domination and exploitation based on caste, gender, and class, and develop a sense of social justice. The colonial epistemic frame continued to define the chief purposes and content of formal post-colonial education. Issues arising out of a deeply hierarchical, caste-based society that Ambedkar (and several others before him) had fought against, along with those thrown up by an alienating colonial curriculum, failed to attract mainstream academic and policy engagement. Concerns of equality and social justice remained peripheral to the curricular discourse, especially as the first education policy of independent India ignored some of the most critical recommendations of the National Education Commission (GoI 1966) towards this aim (Batra 2020a).

As India entered its second decade of neoliberal reforms in the 2000s, the challenge before educators was to reposition curricular knowledge as the fulcrum of sustaining a
constitution-led vision of education towards equity and social justice. This opportunity came with the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT 2005) and the National Curriculum for Teacher Education (NCTE 2009). They established the need to re-contextualize knowledge in curriculum, alongside the passing of a central legislation that made education a fundamental right (GoI 2009). However, with a change in the political regime, more recent neoliberal policies appear to have 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 (Batra 2020b).

Dominant international and national education discourses, contained within the human capital approach, have continued to view curriculum from the perspective of employability and economic growth. This is evident in the state response to the Covid-19 pandemic that has led to the closure of all educational institutions for over four months. The state is making all efforts to privilege online teaching and examinations, despite widespread asymmetry and unequal access to technology, and to boost curriculum materials available through digital means.

Indeed, the pandemic has laid bare underlying, interrelated, and structural problems of massive wealth inequalities, infrastructure inequalities, ecological damage, and the impacts of climate change. What we also see, however, is middle class-led state apathy towards the injustices that the poorest and the most vulnerable people continue to face during this health emergency—and a quiescence to totalitarian ideas of governance that seek to control the everyday lives of people. In this article, I engage with some of these issues, reflecting on the critical role curriculum can play in enabling an ecologically—and socially—just and connected world. I argue for a curriculum whose epistemology imbues economic, social, gender, environmental, and epistemic justice, fostering inner transformation of the individual.

**Inequality crises made visible by the pandemic**

The pandemic has made discernible blatant economic, health, caste-based, gender, and educational inequalities that face the poor, the homeless, socially disadvantaged, migrants, refugees, and those in informal settlements. As one op-ed put it, “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, in large part via a takeover and monetization of the land, waters, forests and resources that were the lifeblood of those at the bottom end of the caste spectrum” (Choudhury and Aga 2020).

The impact of the sudden and stringent lockdown, announced by the government four hours before enforcement started (at midnight on 24th March 2020), is being primarily borne by the Adivasi, Dalit, and “backward” castes of India. These are the “footloose” millions, clubbed as migrant workers 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 streets and sewage lines clean. What the pandemic has uncovered is 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 exacerbated the risks that many of these communities face—from loss of livelihood to hunger to
abject poverty. 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.

About half of India’s urban population are migrants. One-fifth of these are inter-state migrants. Rural to urban migrants are mainly concentrated in 53 million plus urban agglomerations that are home to 140 million people out of 377 million in India’s cities. They made up 43 percent of the country’s urban population, according to the 2011 Census of India (Bhagat et al. 2020). They face severe everyday challenges of 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 are persistently excluded from the economic, cultural, social, and political life of the city they inhabit and nurture.

For those migrants living a life of precarity, the lockdown posed an imminent threat to survival, compelling many to start the long walk back to their villages in April and May 2020. The typical state response has been one of coercion, policing, and imposition of non-transparent surveillance measures to enforce compliance. Several state governments initiated the suspension of major labour laws followed by a Gazette Notification (MoLE 2020) that effectively disenfranchises workers by taking away their fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

Kerala, a state in Southern India, is an exceptional story of success in dealing with both the pandemic and migrants with compassion and efficiency. Local government officials worked closely with community workers to provide basic facilities, and arranged transport at the expense of the state for workers who wanted to return home (Isaac and Sadanandan 2020).

As economic activity came to a grinding halt, the vast majority of workers were left to fend for themselves. Balakrishnan (2020) argues that the ensuing migrant crisis brings to the fore Breman and Van der Linden’s (2014) thesis on the ‘return of the social question’ that interrogates classical conceptualisations of the working class.

This is a mere peep into several challenges that the pandemic has thrown up, posing unprecedented threats to democracy via state action and inaction across several countries, including India. Countries have been put under strict lockdown, restricting people’s mobility using non-transparent surveillance and coercive measures. Unable to offer solutions to these challenges, global capitalism is seen as a major contributor to the problems we are witnessing during the pandemic. The sudden halt of global supply chains has left governments unable to respond adequately to the current health emergency. While some effort is being made to ensure greater access to medical treatment and financial support packages, it is apparent that the poorest and most vulnerable people in diverse societies face extreme forms of state neglect in terms of economic, development, and health support.

Despite this, large sections of India’s elite and middle classes have shown little empathy for tens of millions of people wanting to go home to their villages at this time of crisis. All we see is smugness and acute apathy amongst the middle class and the elite that brought the disease into the country via air travel, while they blame the poor for not maintaining “social distancing” and enabling the spread of the virus by insisting on walking miles to get home. With servitude for the lower castes, and an insistence on “social distancing” for the millions that live in informal settlements, India’s response to Covid-19 is resurrecting the worst excesses of its casteist past (Choudhury and Aga 2020).

The experience of being a Dalit, said Dedhwal (2020), “bring(s) the phenomenon of ‘social distancing’ as part of a caste pandemic rather than the corona pandemic to many of us”. Dedhwal (2020) cautioned that, “in the conceptualisation of caste where history of
the present becomes crucial, the present—oblivious of history—can legitimise wrong ways of approaching caste”. This should prompt us to reflect on why Ambedkar’s unfinished campaign against the caste system was so crucial to India’s freedom, and to seek from his political philosophy ways to problematise the caste question as a curricular response to the inequality crisis that the pandemic has laid bare.

The pandemic has demolished popular perceptions of modernity—both its notion of human supremacy over nature and its narcissistic belief in the power to predict, control, and establish order (Pathak 2020). Modernity’s “story-of-the self”, according to Eisenstein (2020, p. 10), is “a separate individual in a world of Other…even its obsession with money and property – expresses the delusion that the impermanent self can be made permanent through its attachments”. Therefore, Pathak (2020) notes, we must use this opportunity to be ‘reflexive and perceptive’ and gain the courage “to confront new questions”, such as “how do we unlearn modernity in search for a new world?”

Alongside the complacency and self-centred behaviour of the middle classes and the elite in India’s large cities, we also see a large number of people asking fundamental questions that have long been the concern of activists rather than mainstream narratives. Avay Shukla (2020) prompted us to reflect when he wrote, “I am mortified to see the layers of education and affluence, the facade of civilisation being peeled back by a virus to disclose a heart of darkness in our collective inner core, the sub cutaneous mucous of hatred and intolerance for a minority community, contempt for the destitute. All age-old prejudices, bigotry, racism and narrow mindedness have re-emerged”. Several concerned citizens and social organisations are reaching out and giving voice to the large number of migrants who are walking back from major cities to their villages in desperation as the city rejects them, stripping them of livelihood and means of basic survival.

“As Covid stirs our compassion, more and more of us realize that we don’t want to go back to a normal so sorely lacking it. We have the opportunity now to forge a new, more compassionate normal” (Eisenstein 2020, p. 17). To this we must add a socially just normal. Several groups of people across the world see this as a window of opportunity, to envision education anew and to stop seeing it as a mere enabler of employability and participation in economic activity. As vulnerabilities and stark inequalities between people stare us in the face, existential challenges thrown up by the pandemic need to be seen as opportunities to revisit the most critical and significant values that ought to become the basic foundations for policies and activities. As Roy (2020) argues, “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next”.

Could the pandemic trigger a simultaneous movement towards greater economic, social, gender, and environmental justice? How do we create a socially just and compassionate society—the kind that Phule, Dewey and Ambedkar envisioned—a society of “associated living” with attitudes of respect and reverence towards fellow humans? What are the associated epistemologies that can support and accelerate these transformations?

Using the pandemic to institute new forms of exclusion

In the thick of neoliberal reforms, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) and the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) (NCTE 2009) provided epistemic frames that challenge both colonial and post-colonial curricula. With an emphasis on diversity and the principle of “nurturing an overriding identity informed
by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country” (NCERT 2005, p.viii), these curricular frameworks open up the possibility of engagement between curriculum and the lived reality of economic, social, gender, and environmental asymmetry and injustice.

Just as these processes were starting to be institutionalised, with more than a gentle prod by the Indian Supreme Court, via its high-powered Commission on teacher education (GoI 2012), a change in the political regime helped a counter-movement to gather momentum, not only to maintain the status quo but hollow-out these new Constitutional guarantees, replacing state responsibility with private (commercial) opportunities and new ideological commitments.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a much-needed space for this coalition of interests to take over considerable space. This coalition is built on a controversial juxtaposition of lives vs. livelihoods, that neglects the massive impact on children and young people, especially on their education, nutritional security, and mental health. Added to that is a proposed new panacea for educational inequality and poor learning—the digitalisation of education. This could diminish many of the educational gains of the last few decades, by heightening the large digital divide between those who have access to bandwidth, devices, and software—resources not available to hundreds of millions of Indian children and youth. UNICEF’s Remote Learning Reachability Report showed that a mere 24 percent of Indian households have internet connections to access e-education, revealing a “large rural-urban and gender divide that is likely to widen the learning gap across high, middle and low-income families” (LiveMint 2020).

The closure of educational institutions has impacted almost 70 percent of the world’s student population. In India alone, more than 320 million school, college, and university students—130 million of them in the higher-secondary grades—have been impacted by the pandemic-induced lockdown (UNESCO 2020). The World Bank (2020) noted that even before the pandemic, the world was facing a “learning crisis...258 million children and youth of primary- and secondary-school age were out of school and low schooling quality meant many who were in school learned too little”. The push for online education is likely to make many of the critical debates around quality education and the “learning crisis” simply irrelevant.

As educational institutes have remained inaccessible for months, the lockdown is being used by the Government of India to shift the site of education to online platforms. Blatant inequalities and misery encountered in the face of loss of livelihood, food, and shelter, not to mention educational inequality institutionalised via neoliberal reforms, have not prompted the state and central government to rethink education. The crisis is seen as an opportunity to enhance a neoliberal focus on learning outcomes via online learning support systems. Schools and higher education institutes are being directed to construct online learning platforms, positioning them as the future of education. This is being done with little acknowledgement of the fact that a large proportion of young people and children across India do not have internet access.

According to data collected by the National Sample Survey as a part of the 2014 Survey on Education, only 27 percent of households in India have a member with internet access, and only half of the households (47 percent) that have that access own a computing device (including a smartphone). Rough estimates indicate that only 13 percent of the households with students have internet access at home: 27 percent have access in urban areas and only 5 percent in rural areas. State variations are stark. Even in Kerala, only 51 percent of urban households have access to the internet through various sources, but only 23 percent of rural households have access at home. The current crisis has led to the evacuation of hostels,
forcing students to go back home. Almost 48 percent of these students do not have internet access at home (Mukhopadhyay 2020).

The digital divide is stark and clearly intersects with economic inequality. Increasing healthcare costs have pushed 63 million Indians into poverty. This is about 7 percent of the nation’s population (Levinson 2016). That number is likely to go up as a result of the health crisis and subsequent lockdown of the economy.

It is evident that a large number of children and young people are likely to be left out of learning because of a real digital divide. Yet, technocrats are looking at the forced closure of institutions as business and profit-making opportunities, claiming that the current crisis shows “that digital learning can be effective” and the extended lockdown period might provide opportunities for “incentivizing for-profit companies to develop products for the underserved communities” (CSF 2020a).

State governments are making public commitments to scale up the use of digital technologies in schools, using platforms set up by non-state actors, even as 250 million children have been pushed out of classrooms during the lockdown. The Uttar Pradesh education minister admitted that while only “3.5 million students out of the state’s 18 million students have used different online platforms”, an advisory to teachers has been issued to continue these best practices beyond the Covid-19 situation, so that the digital divide that exists today is bridged in the near future (CSF 2020b).

The emphasis on scaling up the use of online platforms and 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 (Bhattacharya 2020).

Several non-state actors have had a considerable agenda-setting influence in this space, especially as they work closely with the central and state governments, on behalf of global advocacy networks. The most recent example is the three-billion-dollar project on Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for (six) States, wherein 85 percent of the project cost will be borne by the Indian government, but which does not address issues of social exclusion and educational marginalisation. Many of them see India as a big market for digital technologies along with the roll-out of 5G, which has now emerged as a deep competition between large corporations. It is no surprise that the current crisis and long periods of lockdown have given free rein to state tendencies to use coercive and authoritarian methods, forcing teachers to comply with state instructions to move to digital platforms for education.

With an undue focus on instrumental aims of education, such as developing skills and competencies, “knowledge” itself is being repositioned, even marginalized. Policy transfer, constructed in decontextualized abstraction, then rationalized by a target-driven universal agenda, has disrupted diverse post-colonial processes of generating decolonized and subaltern knowledges (Batra 2019b). It determines what kind of knowledges are disseminated and which are suppressed, which knowledge has a premium and why, and how the power of reason is undermined in preference for popular identities and desires. All this has distorted the idea of individual rights and social justice.

Epistemological and ontological questions have been central in engaging with issues of social inequality and the deep structural contradictions of the Anthropocene. To enable social equality and environmental justice, it is important to design educational content and processes that are egalitarian and emancipatory. Education, especially in India and the global south, needs to become a means to interrogate domination and exploitation, and to develop inner resilience and a sense of social justice. Eurocentric universalism is increasingly being questioned, leading to a view that the world we live in is a Pluriverse. Social
Envisioning curriculum rooted in equality, social justice, and gender justice

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.

Nineteenth-century colonial India was the site of several local struggles of people who lived marginal and subjugated lives under the hegemony of the feudal upper castes of Indian society. Some of these struggles are reflected in the feminist and anti-caste writings and activism of Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890), Savitribai Phule (1831–1897), Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910), and Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922).

The discourse of anti-caste struggles rested on ideas of transformative education that would help overthrow forces that subjugated Dalits and women. 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” (Rege 2010, p. 93). Trutiya Ratna (a play written by Phule) is a potent curricular and pedagogic imagination of educational processes that Phule’s schools reflect—an act of a deliberative curriculum that is designed to challenge the caste-based social order of 19th-century India (Gopal 2017). Phule’s ideas of education developed from a persuasion of the need to transform Indian society, inspired by the secular contours of a “modern” (colonial) education.

Anti-caste discourses were kept out of the nationalist discourse that focused on contesting “western” forms of knowledge to lead counter movements, in a bid to consolidate India’s freedom struggle. This led to pitting ‘modern’ ideas of education against the “traditional”. Gandhi aimed to make curriculum democratically accessible by making it socio-culturally and economically relevant. Yet, the inclusion of anti-caste discourse in curriculum was seen by several nationalist leaders to weaken the anti-colonial 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.

Ambedkar, on the other hand, recognised the counter-hegemonic nature of a “modern” system of education, and therefore accorded it central importance in his endeavour to “overthrow the hierarchical structure and ideology of caste” (Velaskar 2012, p. 246). Ambedkar’s ideology of liberation drew from Enlightenment philosophy, the indigenous
thoughts of Buddha, Phule, and Kabir, and his own political struggles—and equality was the overriding principle of his struggle. His socio-political thought was thus rooted in “social democratic liberalism” wherein criticality was accorded to a synthesis between individuals, community, and society (Velaskar 2012).

The discourse of anti-caste struggles predated the nationalist discourse that led to the freedom movement. While for Gandhi, swaraj was about breaking the shackles of colonial rule and of oneself, Ambedkar’s idea of freedom, influenced by Phule, was about liberating the oppressed via a commitment to social equality. Ambedkar was deeply influenced by Dewey. Hence, for him democracy was a form of “associated living”, central to which are ideas of equality, fraternity, and mutual respect for each other (Mukherjee 2009).

The 20th-century anti-colonial struggle for India’s independence missed making any real epistemic connection with anti-caste discourses. Hence, the path that India took in adopting modern education carried with it a constituted coloniality in which the hierarchical and hegemonic character of Brahmanical power remained central (Batra 2020a). Within this colonial-feudal nexus, the most privileged, largely upper-caste Indians, reaped most of the benefits of the modern system of education. The discourse of anti-caste struggles, and hence engagement with questions of equity and justice, was left out of the curriculum. Naik (1982) documented how suggestions to link quality with equity and justice, and to ensure equality of opportunity for the disadvantaged and poor, was met with strong disapproval, even hostility.

Drawing on the political philosophy of Phule and Ambedkar, scholars have argued how engagement with colonial and caste oppression provides a vision of education for social transformation (Rege 2010; Velaskar 2012), emphasizing the need to view education as deliberative democracy and curriculum as an act of social dialogue. Both Phule and Ambedkar underlined ‘situated knowledge’ as critical to opening the possibilities to enable the oppressed to understand and transform the relationship between knowledge and power (Rege 2010). 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, p. 93). Integrating practices from the feminist movement, Rege (2010) demonstrated how “Phule-Ambedkerite-Feminist Pedagogies” offer a critical space for generating new knowledge. Bringing in and 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.

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

One critical line of argument centers around the need to acknowledge that “non-western, perhaps even non-northern theories and philosophies must be the starting point for new critical engagements” and that “new understandings emerge if we are open to decentering and deprivileging the hegemonic vantage point” (Apple 2014, p. 161). Seeking to unsettle European and American imperialism could be a critical step towards discovering diverse ways of reasoning that may exist in the peripheries of the knowledge hierarchy (Chen 2010).

The persistent exclusion of the “experience of caste” and the lived realities of diversity and marginalization have maintained the “universalistic” nature of the Indian educational discourse that informs curriculum design and practice. 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 inclusion of hitherto excluded social narratives, experiences, and voices is critical to engage with the intersectionality of structures of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity. 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. Curriculum materials that make this possible include gender and Dalit testimonies, biographies, resistance music, and poetry. The Bachelor of Elementary Education provides a good example of how diverse ways of knowing, including theatre, create democratic learning spaces and opportunities for reflexivity (Batra 2015).

Post-colonial education in independent India helped forge an alliance between modernity and the nation. This established knowledge as synonymous with Brahmanical knowledge, leaving caste out of interrogation. A discourse of binaries of the traditional and modern, firmly established by the colonial curriculum, disallowed any real critique of the dominant epistemological positions that structure educational theory. Arguing for instituting “Dalit studies as pedagogic practice”, Rege (2007, p. 5) explains how the particularistic nature of the Dalit discourse creates the possibility of challenging the “logic of exclusion” embedded in a discourse of binaries. The feminist or Dalit standpoint “is a collective subject position”, offering critical frames of reference to create counter curricular narratives (Rege 2000 p. 495). A situated curriculum thus becomes not only the means to interrogate domination and exploitation in societies, but also a means to develop inner resilience and a sense of social justice.

Revisiting thinkers who sought to transform society via envisioning the educational process differently would be a critical step forward. For Dewey, formal education provided the critical social space necessary to constantly review the social fabric that was being depersonalized by the industrial and commercial culture of the early 20th century. Although Dewey (1902) brought the academic and public universes closer through his conception of curriculum, revealing its broad scope, in more recent times the organisation, structuring, codifying, and hierarchy of knowledge has been the focus of a formal curriculum (Jonnaert and Therriault 2013).

For Ambedkar, public education in the form of mass organizational activities or discourses between intellectuals and the public were the means to create cultural transformation in a society ridden with caste hierarchies. Ambedkar, like Gramsci, believed that education was a critical social activity within a broader network of experience, history, and collective struggle (Zene 2018). 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, p. 413).

While a lot can be achieved via appropriate selection of curriculum content and its treatment, critical pedagogic communication is necessary to ensure that learners engage with social diversity and multiple perspectives, and that they understand their own and others’ positions in society. This becomes possible when the educational process is designed as dialogue—between teacher and students and among students—helping students to think and reflect from several perspectives as they engage. Breaking the hierarchy between the teacher and taught helps students develop a sense of discerning judgement rather than becoming judgemental, encouraging a sense of empathic inquiry and critical thinking.
Pedagogical communication needs to follow these basic principles of democracy. This can be achieved by first engaging with difference, as in diversity. A constant engagement with diverse perspectives can help develop personal attributes of an open mind and social reflexivity. Teaching, studying, understanding, and coping with “alterity” (a comprehensive relationship with the other) is central to developing a respect for all and listening to the “other”. Alterity is particularly important in enabling young people to understand diversity and appreciate difference rather than hierarchise it.

It is important to enable educational content and design processes to be egalitarian and emancipatory, by making social equality and social justice viable aims of education, even though it cannot do so alone. It would therefore be necessary to problematise critical social, economic, environmental, and political inequality, forming multiple propositions to address them as pivotal educational content. There is indeed 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, pp. 38, 3).

This could be enabled through engaging with contemporary ideological debates, for example on the institutionalisation of patriarchy, protectionism, the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable, and the upsurge in racist and casteist behaviour across societies. It would be necessary to examine how these ideologies are perpetuated through school and higher education curricula and institutional arrangements, and through concerted political efforts at altering the popular historical consciousness of large masses of people. This could help bridge the ontological–epistemological gap that often characterises formal knowledge, especially in areas of contest like caste, gender, and the environment.

Environmental justice: 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. In an earlier time and context, these communities 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 significant people’s movements around the environment, there is limited permeation of this discourse into mainstream curricula. Even the Indian Supreme Court’s fiat on the importance of environmental education, alongside its entry into the national curriculum in the early 1990s, had limited impact in India’s National Curriculum Framework and hence on the everyday practices of teaching and learning. 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, in favour of neo-liberal interests.

The Covid-19 pandemic is symptomatic, both in India and across the globe, of the deep environmental and social predicament of human civilization on the threshold of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2011). This is a stark reminder that we cannot go about or return to economic and social life “business as usual”, except at deep peril to society. 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. It is critical to understand how the trajectory of inequality in development is maintained through a “modern” system of education and further exacerbated by a neoliberal agenda.

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, p. 28). Laying the foundations for a mechanist intellectual framework, such knowledge has been critiqued as “objectified, abstract, absolute and unchanging”. Attention is called to the need to reconstruct educational knowledge by re-examining our relationship with nature. Direct engagement with the environment is seen to be “fundamental to learning, and schools need to be embedded in the local community so that learning tasks can emerge out of real life contexts and both teacher and learner can work together” (Tasker 2004, p. 29). This approach has largely been ignored by mainstream education, which focuses instead on changing human behavior to create more efficient and productive economic systems.

While the cumulative impact of a consumerist lifestyle on the earth’s ecosystems has been the focus of climate change scientists and activists, there is limited emphasis on “environmental (in)justice with regards to the unequal distribution of sufferings, such as the thoughtless exploitation of labourers (other humans) for our need for overconsumption…the instrumentalization, reification, and commodification of non-human animals for food production” (Su and Su 2019, p. 1). The socio-ecological crisis is therefore “not a surface-phenomenon” requiring only a little bit of mending here and there. Rather, it is built into the core of modern culture that needs to be problematized and challenged (Schmidt 2013, p. 479).

Problematising the role of education in the current socio-ecological crisis and pandemic would be critical to envisioning a new role for curriculum in addressing the Anthropocene, especially as “modern science and technology not only contribute to rampant destruction but no longer seem able to devise workable solutions to it. That is why epistemological questions are fundamental in discussing questions about nature” (Escobar 2008, p. 8). 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. These communities and societies have traditionally lived in harmony with nature, but are seriously threatened by the contemporary model of economic growth and development.

Several theorists questioning Eurocentric universalism are of the view that “the world we live in is a pluriverse—it is inherently pluralistic. It contains many imperfect worldviews from where many plausible modes of thinking, doing and living can be developed and employed. Self-critical intellectuals have continued to generate many plausible modes of thinking, doing and living from the intellectual heritage of different peoples” (Nweke 2019). This needs to be at the center of our efforts to reimagine curriculum. “Emerging alternative interpretation recognises that the student is embedded in multiple relationships with the human and other-than-human world and these relationships enable and catalyse the emergence of knowledge” (Dawson 2019, p. 272).

Curriculum must ask what lived relations might mean for learning. It needs to give more attention to cross-species communication (Haraway 2008), and push us not to think in an anthropocentric, speciesist manner (Wolfe 2003). Curriculum must lay emphasis on democratic forms of being-together in learning, without insisting on human exceptionalism.
We may need to reimagine a new post-humanist curriculum studies, one that not only deconstructs Western thought from within, but one that engages with what Paraskeva (2011) calls the struggle against epistemicides that “seeks non-hegemonic epistemological (and ontological) grounding” (Snaza et al. 2014, p. 52). We need to situate this within the economic, social, gender, and ecological fault lines that have opened following the pandemic and seek deeper solutions that are grounded in diverse socio-cultural and socio-political cultures and epistemologies, across all regions of the world.

Drawing on social and student-led movements, Saeed (2020, p. 10) proposed an educational framework called Critical Pedagogy and Feminist Praxis that can help address the various crises of the Anthropocene epoch, through an education that allows deeper introspection and interrogation of structural injustices. It is argued that “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. Transcending the economic, social, gender, and environmental fragmentation that the pandemic leaves behind will require a return to the inclusive, equal, and fraternal founding vision for India, as practiced and articulated by Ambedkar, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and Gandhi.

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, enshrined in its Preamble and Fundamental Rights. A number of questions remained unresolved during this formative period, especially around educational and environmental justice, that were inserted via multiple Constitutional amendments from 1976–2009. This document provides the ontological and epistemological foundations to transition from a deeply hierarchical and exclusionary economic and social order, 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.

India’s national curricular documents for school and teacher education, along with the Right to Education, provide an epistemic frame that challenges both the overt and hidden colonial and post-colonial curricula rooted in “modernity”. These constitute critical knowledge frames that have the potential to engage learners with the lived reality of economic, social, gender, and environmental asymmetry and injustice.

Reiterating a commitment to the values enshrined in the Indian Constitution, the NCF (NCERT 2005) established social enquiry as a scientific endeavour that must challenge patriarchal frames and strive to generate in students “a critical moral and mental energy, making them alert to the social forces that threaten these [Constitutional] values…[and] develop amongst them…sensitive, interrogative and transformative citizens” (NCERT 2005, p. 48). It argues for providing the social sensibilities, cultural sensibilities, and analytical capacities required to adjust to an increasingly interdependent world, and to develop the active citizenry required to deal with the political and economic realities that govern its functioning. Towards this, the NCF recommended engaging learners with issues of poverty, illiteracy, child labour, class, caste, and gender from multiple perspectives, including
the positive stories of persevering community action, with the aim to cultivate and nurture egalitarian and secular values (p. 49).

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, unfolding the school curriculum in its true spirit—in Pinar’s (2004, p. 848) words, “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”.

Based on the NCFTE, 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, p. 246), “Conflict can go away only if we move to another domain where co-existence takes place. The knowledge of this knowledge constitutes the social imperative for a human-centered ethics”. 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.

Curriculum has typically been viewed as a tool for regulating and adapting educational systems to society’s needs and trends. In doing this, it has served to construct assumptions which are legitimized via the institutional arrangements of systems of education. However, 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).

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. These disparate theories have the potential to engage with intersectionality, which if made central to curriculum design could benefit from engaging with the “human” as the problematic (Snaza et al. 2014, p. 41). A curricular response to the stark realities of inequality and social injustice, made visible by the pandemic, would include cognizing the significance of subaltern disciplines and imagining transformative pedagogies that can help reclaim education spaces and sustain epistemic 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. 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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