

**KRISHNA, K. (1991). POLITICAL
AGENDA OF EDUCATION: A STUDY OF
COLONIALIST AND NATIONALIST IDEAS.
NEW DELHI: SAGE.**

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In India, we are now riding on a wave of change in education; we have started talking about child centric curricula driven by constructivist epistemological ideas, moving away from textbook driven, didactic and authoritarian classroom approaches. Discussions about reservations bring us back to the discussion of caste as a factor in equality in educational opportunities. We still feel the need to discuss about girl's education separately which clearly indicates that the challenges of gender continue to exist in education. Empowering teachers and the teaching profession still remains a challenge in front of today's society. Is our past guiding our present? How did the contemporary education system in India develop? What factors, motives and agendas shaped this development?

In order to understand the current state of education in India, it is of paramount importance to analyse its historical context. The book "Political agenda of education: A study of colonialist and nationalist ideas" by Krishna Kumar is a detailed study of the history of ideas that shaped colonial policy in education and the nationalist struggle against colonial rule. The book aims at uncovering relations between indigenous traditions of pedagogy, colonial initiatives in shaping school teaching and India's educational outlook today.

Kumar starts with the analysis of the 'education ideal' of colonial India. For his analysis, he takes Mannheim's concept of 'educational ideal as a means of historical inquiry'. Educational ideals are not of eternal nature but they morph with the changes in its guiding cultural activities over time. Hence, Kumar challenges the popular belief that colonial education was 'aimed' at systematically producing clerks suitable for serving the British Raj. He explains why and how this agenda cannot be the unchanged agenda of entire colonial education which spanned over around a century. Historically, it is evident that a multitude of political leaders, intellectuals, doctors and other professionals have emerged from this very colonial education and not only office clerks. Products of colonial education showed diversity. Many were of course socialised into colonial values whereas many others stood against those values. Hence, it is cumbersome to analyse colonial education through the instrumentalist view as a factory production of clerks.

Instead, Kumar discussed the varied goals that colonial education attempted to achieve – from the 'pursuit of order' to 'developing moral agenda' for the creation of civil society. The colonial masters felt that it was their responsibility to train the natives to become citizens and to teach them new ways of acting and thinking.

In the second half of the book, Kumar deals with the dynamics of the freedom struggle and its three major quests/value orientations as identified by him: the quest for justice; the quest for self-identity; and the concept of progress. These ideals inspired educational thought during the independence struggle. He looks at Phule's anti-Brahminism movement, reform movements of the lower castes led by Ambedkar and the issue of girls' education to understand the pursuit of justice and equality. The Swadeshi movement and the Hindi movement which were based on the quest for self-identity rooted in the religio-cultural revivalism shaped the development of new curricula and pedagogy during the nationalist struggle. Kumar argues that the quest for self-identity involved an interest in pedagogy. This influenced the organisation of knowledge in a key area of curriculum, namely teaching Hindi. Here Kumar here unravels the important interlinks between knowledge and power. The analysis of transformation of Hindi into a class dialect of the educated gives an insight into the revivalist streak of politics in the freedom struggle.

Kumar describes the concept of progress of which industrialisation was the focus. He contrasts Gandhian thinking of progress with other leaders and industrialists of independent India. He argues that the political stature of Gandhi made it impossible to reject his ideas on education, and hence, Nai Talim had to be implemented as a programme for educational reconstruction. But it left the structure of knowledge, values and opportunities embedded in the education system more or less untouched. The old liberal ideas of the propertied individual and his priorities for leading a comfortable secure life were not impacted.

Kumar concludes by describing the education system in independent India as an agency contributing primarily to the maintenance of law and order. This book is a powerful analysis of the current educational scenario in the country within a historical framework where Kumar skilfully unfolds various tensions during the period of colonial subjugation and the nationalist struggle against it. Let us look at two such tensions in detail.

The author unfolds the debates surrounding 'indigenous' and 'western' knowledge. What is a valid knowledge and who decides that? In the

pre-British era, most of the education in India happened either through apprenticeship by actually working with the professionals and learning by doing or it happened through the Guru-Shishya tradition by staying with the Guru. Knowledge was not validated, standardised or institutionalised in terms of curricula or standardisation of teaching-learning processes. It was confined to the upper castes, especially to the males.

The colonial masters felt the need to institutionalise knowledge. This was influenced by colonial bureaucratic structures and functions. What we teach today in our schools, and its pedagogy and curricula is linked to the choices made regarding constructing 'valid school knowledge' that took place in the 19th century. To add to this, the idea of 'what is worth teaching' is also influenced by colonial views of Indian society.

Let's take an example – Why am I writing this essay in English?

English is a foreign language for a person whose mother tongue is Marathi and whose family has spoken Hindi till the last but one generation. I was introduced to English language in the fourth standard in my school. I am more comfortable with the two other languages mentioned above. Still I am writing this essay in English. The popular view would argue that English is the need of the globalised world today and hence one is being expected to write this essay in English. In fact, I would disagree with this and put forward the examples of China or Germany, France or Japan, countries that manage to stay competent in this globalising world without the compulsion of English.

It is impossible to address this problem without the references to the historical context discussed by Krishna Kumar. Colonial rule determined the salience of English for me and several preceding generations. The history of the four nations mentioned earlier, which were never colonised, is different from ours. In colonial India, the job of deciding, selecting and shaping school knowledge was performed initially by 'enlightened outsiders' and later by 'educated Indians'. Indigenous knowledge and pedagogic traditions were seen to be of very little use for educational purposes. Rather, indigenous knowledge was seen as 'deficient' and was claimed to have several elements that would not qualify it as 'modern'. The new content and curricula were not challenged by 'educated Indians'. Eventually indigenous knowledge and cultural forms got excluded from the curricula of schools. English education made it almost impossible to link school knowledge to the children's everyday world. Those who picked up this education, mostly the upper castes, enabled to place themselves above the 'illiterate masses' morally and intellectually. This

enabled them further to see themselves as legitimate candidates for a share in the colonial state's power. The skills possessed by the masses, almost by definition, could not qualify as knowledge worthy of inclusion in schools.

Power manifested through colonial rule decided the validity of knowledge systems. Possession of 'legitimate' knowledge, in return, enabled a share in power. Today, when an Indian might assume English as a 'must' for her existence, it is actually an outcome of this relation between power and knowledge. Power-knowledge relations has served as a form of social control through education in colonial period and has continued to do so even today. If Indians would not have been colonised and ruled by the British, it is difficult for me to imagine writing this essay in English.

One might counter-argue about the survival of imprints of colonial educational structures and systems that after seven decades of independence followed by decades of fierce nationalist struggle. Why did revivalist movements not reorient educational thought to indigenous knowledge streams, decrease English's dominance, and revive Indian languages? Krishna Kumar's framework helps us understand this with the help of his concept of 'quest for self-identity'.

India is a heterogeneous mixture of diverse cultures, and it is difficult to see India as one nation. Most of the revivalist movements in quest of self-identity could only influence the Hindi speaking belt in northern India. As there was no 'one' strand integrating India - Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu or Tamil could not become India's national, unifying language. The power centre of the nationalist movement and the post-independence era has been Northern India, which left other languages except Hindi behind in the race. The place of English in independent Indian society has remained untouched.

Another interesting theme that emerges from Krishna Kumar's book is the tension between several societal groups in pursuit of equality. It is interesting to note that when upper caste Indians were demanding their right to be equal with Englishmen, especially in the educational context, 'lower caste' Indians were fighting against upper caste hegemony in the same terrain. An example of the first kind of struggle can be seen in the demand for opening up of the ICS examination for the educated elite of India. The second kind of struggle is exemplified by the movements led by Phule and Ambedkar. Phule started a movement against brahminical hegemony in education when he wrote to the Hunter Commission in 1884. Ambedkar's movement of uniting dalits against societal and educational inequalities and inequities arose in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The demand for girls' education as a strong

strand of resistance against male-dominated, patriarchal, Indian society also gathered steam during the same period of time.

Both the struggles against hegemonic educational structures and processes during the period of the nationalist struggle can be understood by the positioning of those agitating, in the structure of Indian society. The quest for equality with the colonial masters expressed itself in the agitation against the British whereas the Phule believed that equality for the downtrodden in education can only be achieved in the British Raj.

While concluding, I must say that 'Political Agenda of Education` offers an outstanding and path breaking contribution to educational theory. The effective use of a historical framework regarding educational ideals helps readers understand the varied political agendas of the changing times and guides them to understand the current situation of education in India and the Indian subcontinent. This book demonstrates the necessity of understanding the historical context of education in order to understand the intricacies of contemporary issues. This book will help readers understand challenges faced in contemporary schools, such as resistance to changes in epistemological paradigm shift (change to constructivism), teacher identity, teacher motivation, gender and education, to name but a few.

