Chapter 1

Curriculum in India
Narratives, Debates, and a Deliberative Agenda

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Context

The early period of British colonial rule witnessed a long and sharp debate between the Anglicists and the Orientalists about the validity and utility of classical and indigenous systems of knowledge in the Indian subcontinent. The adoption of Macaulay’s minute by the East India Company in 1835 led to the ascendance of the Anglicists and the establishment of a colonial system of education with the goal of creating a new class of English-proficient petty public servants. This in time led to the displacement of vernacular systems of education based on classical and “folk” curricula derived from a plurality of educational traditions.

The British “essentialist” view of knowledge of the nineteenth century emphasized the individual, scientific, universal, and moral aims of education ahead of the social and cultural. This, combined with the colonial construction of Indian society, designed to preserve the ideological lead of the Empire post-1857, helped shape the official nineteenth-century school curriculum. The rejection of nationalist Gopal Krishna Gokhale’s Bill (1911) to make primary education free and compulsory by the colonial administration and English-educated and often upper-caste elite further helped sustain a curriculum that focused on colonial objectives. Holmes and McLean (1989, 151) argues that despite tensions between the colonial view of education and the nationalist postcolonial aims of education, British essentialism grew unassailable roots in India partly because “colonial values coincided with those of indigenous traditions.”
The rejection of indigenous knowledge and the sociocultural context in shaping curriculum in the diverse subcontinental landscape of India created a deep conflict between education and culture (Kumar 2005). This is still in contest in contemporary South Asia. Thus “school-based knowledge became isolated from the everyday reality and cultural milieu of the child.” This isolation characterizes the bulk of educational practice across India even today and lies at the root of the country’s poor performance in universalizing critical education, well over half a century after the close of one of the largest mass emancipation movements that led to India’s independence in 1947.

From the mid-nineteenth century colonial education came to be associated with an urban elite, severed from the culture and economic realities of the rural masses. In 1901, Rabindranath Tagore founded Shantiniketan as a concrete response to his fervent critique of colonial education. In his view, the British system was inadequate as it failed to resonate with the people of India. His aim was to create a learning environment inspired by nature and a curriculum that was responsive to the culture of the people. Tagore was convinced of the goals of modern education but was equally convinced that these be achieved through the language and culture of the people. Tagore’s views on education influenced the articulation of nationalist ideas on education, but were not accepted by many political leaders of the Swadeshi movement.

Gandhi’s “Nai Talim” was conceived as a national system of education—an alternative to colonial education as part of the nationalist struggle for freedom. It was adopted by many states in 1937, about the same time when Tagore popularized science through his idea of loka-siksha (popular education). Although Tagore acknowledged the convergence between his idea of popular education and Gandhi’s basic education, he felt that the scheme of basic education placed undue emphasis on practical training at the cost of artistic creativity (Bhattacharya 2004). Shantiniketan remains to this day a symbol of Tagore’s conviction that the “object of education is the freedom of mind which can only be achieved through the path of freedom . . . (where) children should not have mere schools for their lessons, but a world whose guiding spirit is personal love” (Tagore 1921, 147).

Gandhi’s “Nai Talim” tried to address several critical aspects of the social and economic realities of the 1940s, especially of rural India. School curriculum was designed to use local languages and local cultures in training people in traditional crafts such as spinning and weaving. More importantly, “Gandhi was proposing the allocation of a substantive place in the school curriculum to systems of knowledge developed and associated with oppressed groups of Indian society, namely artisans, peasants and cleaners” (Kumar 2009, 11) The attempt was to break the frames of knowledge associated with dominant castes. Gandhi’s “Nai Talim” was a response to both—the elite system of colonial education perceived to be culturally and economically irrelevant as well as to the upper caste hegemonic control over who can be educated. In doing this the “problem” of curriculum was to become an act of “deliberation” rather than one based on “an intrinsic view of knowledge.” This powerful idea of Gandhi was much ahead of its time, when Western debates on curriculum of the 1950s and 1960s were circumscribed to either articulating the “scientific principles” of developing curriculum or turning toward the philosophers’ claim of identifying knowledge that had intrinsic worth.