If “the academic field of curriculum studies is embedded in national culture” (Pinar 2005, 26) and our own social, historical, and institutional locations impinge on the questions we ask and the answers we give, then this effort to write about curriculum studies needs to take note of the specificity of India. I attempt to understand meaning and construction of the field of curriculum studies in India along two overlapping axes: (a) colonial experience, trajectory, practices, and tussles of nation building and democracy in India to locate curriculum in relation to larger context and developments, and (b) work in the area of education, curriculum, and textbooks by state and nonstate institutions to understand the ideas that have shaped curriculum studies and debates in India. This survey is used to take an overview of the state of the field of curriculum studies in India, its silences, challenges, and emerging areas of study. But before we undertake this exercise, it may be pertinent to understand the challenges involved in such an engagement.

Challenges for Curriculum Studies in India

Syllabus Society and Textbook Culture

The term “curriculum” has a historically specified usage. In the United States and Western Europe, irrespective of the shift from “curriculum development” to “understanding,” there has been a tradition of curriculum formulation, implying autonomy for teachers to decide their methods and make choices about the subjects that
students would study “to reach a certain educational level” (Dottrens 1962, 82). In India, which following Dottrens may be classified as a “syllabus society,” there has been a “textbook culture,” implying the low status of teachers with little freedom and little influence over matters of curriculum (Department of Teacher Education 1969; Government of India 1961a; Harap 1959; Lulla 1968). It emphasizes the syllabus and assigns centrality to textbooks and examinations (Kumar 1988, 452–453). Instead of a “child’s learning requirement, aims of education and the socio-economic and cultural contexts of learners,” examination requirements have led the development of curriculum, syllabi, and textbooks (NCERT 2006, iv). Education psychology has traditionally dominated the teacher training courses (Government of India 1961a; 1961b; Pandey 1969). Such a culture, with its colonial legacy, lays emphasis on memorization, on recitation without meaning, and does not involve cognitive engagement and interaction with the contents of the textbook. This centrality of textbooks in the Indian education system means that concerns, debates, and controversies around textbooks in colonial and postcolonial India must be the focus of our discussion to understand central questions of curriculum, namely, what knowledge is of most worth, what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge it is, and what are the social, political, and ideological underpinnings of the curriculum. Such an attempt has to begin with the recognition that while history textbooks have generated several heated debates (Rudolph and Rudolph 1983; Mukherjee and Mukherjee 2002; Habib, Jaiswal, and Mukherjee 2003), there has been an almost total absence of social histories of curriculum in general, and of controversies and debates about other school subjects.

Colonial and Postcolonial Trajectories and Diversities

To understand how textbooks have been implicated in the ideological processes and discourses of state in colonial and postcolonial contexts, how and with what effects contestations over formation of citizenship/nationhood and struggles over identity have taken place on the terrain of textbooks, we need to attend to histories of colonialism, trajectories of modernity, state formation, and democracy in India. We also need to understand how the Indian state and education are enmeshed in global relations of political economy, policy prescriptions, and borrowing.

This enquiry becomes increasingly complicated due to regional diversities within India due to linguistic differences, distinct histories of state formation, economic development, provision of education, and institutional capacities. These differences pertain to these regions being part of British India or a princely state, the longevity of colonial contact and colonization, social reform movements, agrarian and industrial relations, workings of democracy, shifts in social power, and the contemporary history of involvement of global networks of funding, research, and advocacy. Understanding of the purposes of education also varies across regions and different caste groups, and different “folk” notions and practices interact with “modern” notions. Further, any attempt to capture the history of concerns about curriculum and textbooks in India needs to move beyond the state system and bring voluntary institutions within its ambit to study epistemological and ideological considerations that have guided ideas and practices of curriculum in India.