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Critical Literacy in India

A Case for Critical and Postcritical Education

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Historical Legacy of Criticality in India

The centrality of critical thinking in India's ancient system of education was overtaken by the mass, rote-focused education of the colonial period as it systematically wiped out critical elements from indigenous education. Vedic traditions that spanned centuries in the BCE and well into the modern period advocated *Nyaya*, which, as a school of classical Indian philosophy, brought developments in epistemology, metaphysics, and logic. *Nyaya* centered around arguments based on critical reasoning and *pramana,* or "knowledge-source" that drew on perception and inference (Dasti & Philips, 2017, p. 5). Indeed, the *Nyaya Sutra* was focused on testimony based on the meaning of words and sentences and broadly linguistic categories (p. 138). Nevertheless, even though the ancient system was holistic and focused on high-level critical thinking, such education was selectively offered only to higher caste men. Higher castes, mainly men, were provided education about the material and spiritual world, and character building, discipline, vocational development, grammar, philosophy, metrics, medicine, painting, and music (Bhatta, 2009), while the common person's education dealt with learning practical, hands-on skills.

With the arrival of Islam in India in the seventh century, there were Islamic influences on education. However, the major shift came with British colonization that introduced Western education. Schooling for "ordinary" (read lower caste) children changed from vernacular language village schools to mass education, and missionary schools focused on character building with English as the medium of instruction. English teaching meant moral instruction was the focus of literacy efforts. Through this quasi-Christian religious emphasis, children learned obedience, modesty, and the acceptance of their station in society. On the

other hand, the upper classes would receive education around classical languages that promoted inquiry and reflection (Kumar, 1989). As a result of the divisive nature of education, the ideal ordinary Indian colonial citizen was trained to be subservient, and their education eliminated the prospects of criticality.

To worsen this situation, MacCaulay's (1835) infamous *Minute on Indian Education* emphasized the importance of English and, although bilingual education continued in schools resulting in a multilingual education system, English, as superior, acquired linguistic capital over the 222 vernacular languages recorded by the 1921 census (Government of India, 1921, p. 193), p. 193). Further, under British colonialism, as Kumar (2014, p. 5), p. 5) and Topdar (2015) argue, textbooks were mandatory and restrained any questioning from students. Post-independence, the Indian education system has remained faithful to prescribed texts eventuating in a "textbook culture" (Kumar. 1988, p. 452) that has endured to the present day. As Syeed, (2018) observes, in the current education system, where authors of textbooks have represented real-life contexts, NCERT officials have opposed these as a "distorted representation of Indian diversity, and the over-reliance on constructivist approaches to teaching content" (p. 554).

Although critical thinking was introduced to the curriculum by the National Curriculum Framework (2005), the overreliance on textbooks and rote learning (Harrell, 2019) negates learners as meaningful text analysts and critical thinkers. Postcolonial education has engaged in hybridized mimicry by continuing the overall colonial education system framework while retaining the vernacular system. The colonial educational framework has meant that the moral focus and a transactional classroom with teachers explaining, interpreting, and imposing meaning on children persists. Much of what prevails in schools is an authoritarian system that follows control and teacher dominance. Student-centered classrooms are generally absent; the teacher does not take on the role of a "critical educator "(McLaren, 1992, p. 8) who can help students acquire a language of reflection and critique the dominant discourses. Subsequently, the education system positions children as passive receptacles taught to follow instead of as thinking individuals with a capacity to be meaning-makers, text participants, and text analysts.

Within this rather morbid landscape, Indian education, as the second-largest education system, attempts to provide uniform education across the country while attending to children's cultural and social needs (MHRD, 2017-2018). In 2009, the landmark bill of *The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education* Act (RTE) was passed, thereby granting free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of six and 14. Government schools now see unprecedented enrollment. All private schools have a 25% RTE quota, granting children from the nearby vicinities access to primary schooling.

Nevertheless, 11 years into the systemic universalization of education, children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds continue year after year in the school system without gaining a sound education. The RTE Act and the *National Early Childhood Care and Education* (ECCE) Policy in 2013 raised awareness of the dire state of illiteracy among young children. Although school enrollment increased, many preschool children are not enrolled in schools, the dropout rate has been consistently high, and literacy rates in early primary years have remained below average (NCERT, 2019). The state of Kerala is at the top with 93.91% overall literacy and 91.98% female literacy, with states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Bihar among states below the national average both in the overall rate and female literacy. Besides, although RTE enhanced enrolment, there has not been a comparable focus on high-quality education (Mehendale, 2014, p. 88). In addition, given the shortage of principals, teachers, and administrative staff, along with a scarcity of resources and necessary infrastructure, the goal of achieving full literacy is a distant aim. Standards for learning outcomes are demonstrably low. Of particular concern are the discriminatory approaches to educating children of Dalits (also known as Scheduled Caste; untouchables in the caste system) and indigenous children (Scheduled Tribes).

In India, the *Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER, 2019), a nationwide household survey that evaluates students' learning across India in its report on Early Years, assessed the foundational skills of a representative sample of 36,930 children in the age group of 4–8 years. It found that almost half of four-year-old and a quarter of five-year-old children from low socioeconomic backgrounds perform lower on cognitive ability and foundational ability assessments than children enrolled in private kindergartens (ASER, 2019, p. 48).

p. 48). ASER (2018) reported that of all children enrolled in Std. VIII about 73% can read a Std. II text and ASER (2019) reported that 50.8% children in Std.III can read a Std. I level text . These are the impoverished foundations on which the present-day Indian youth attempt to build their lives and livelihoods.

Within such a system, the opportunities for critical thinking and critical literacy are low or absent. Since the liberalization of the economy in 1991, the knowledge economy's neoliberal agenda has refined the commodification of education with elite schools focusing on market profitability through education. The discourse of child-centered education draws little on children's real-world experiences and primarily operates in the colonial mode of teacher-controlled pedagogies(Kumar, 2014). Although there are a sizeable number of private sector and elite schools that presumably apply critical thinking and critical literacy, it is otherwise generally absent from public schools.

Literacy and Critical Literacy

Although, as we have argued, critical reflection and critical debates had been an essential aspect of ancient Indian education, neocolonial mass education requires decolonization. The current neocolonial approach to literacy is noncritical acceptance of the textbook as the source of knowledge and exclusion of critical reflection that would enable meaningful text analysis.

Literacy as a meaning-making process is the ability to examine a text through a critical lens and question, appreciate, and make meaning with texts of all forms, whether written, oral, symbolic, or visual (Luke & Freebody, 1999; Luke, 2000/2018). As a social practice, critical literacy aims to provide contextual agency and power to the learner by being situated within the social and cultural contexts (see Luke & Freebody, 1999). Further, it is a constant iterative process with fluid, meaning potential (Iyer, 2007), that aims to unearth ideological positionings in texts and work toward a transformative politics (Iyer, 2007); see also McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). As Comber (2013) observes, critical literacy is "an evolving repertoire of practices of analysis and interrogation which move between the micro

features of texts and the macro conditions of institutions, focusing on how relations of power work through these practices” (p. 589).

Morrell (2007) discusses critical literacy as a “pedagogy of access and dissent” (p. 237) that illustrates how language and power are interrelated and foregrounds people’s interests in power and privilege. Morrell (2007) argues that by examining texts, there is a possibility of exposing and arriving at a socially just order. Lankshear (1994)) observes that besides a critical perspective on texts, critical literacy provides “critical readings of wider *social practices, arrangements, relations, allocations, procedures*” (p. 10, emphasis in the original; see also Mulcahy, 2008). However, the current Indian education system, still primarily textbook-focused, has had little scope for examining broader social practices that do not feature in texts.

A significant issue due to the overreliance on textbooks is students’ unquestioned exposure to non-secular, inequitable, and ideological representations promoted by non-CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) schools. Further, textbooks constrain the students to basic understanding and deny them the opportunity to critically engage with the content, a tool kit that enables learners to unpack texts and social institutions where these texts are situated (Luke, 2000/2018). The textbook culture (Kumar, 1988, p. 452), results in dominant forms of literacy that “serve as a process of colonization,” (McLaren, 1992, p. 12) which is especially salient in the problematic issue of local languages in schools that we now discuss.

The Systemic and Sociocultural Macrocosm

A typical scenario in public schools is of a six-year-old who enters Grade One with limited print exposure at home. More than 60% of the 30,000 children assessed across five states in Grades Two and Four come from families where no adult woman has ever been to school, and more than 50% of children have absolutely no print materials available at home (Bhattacharjea, Wadhwa, & Banerji, 2011). Therefore, it is worth concluding that the six-year-old’s experience resonates with tens of millions of Indian children who depend on schools to introduce them to print literacy.

According to the *Language* paper by the Census of India (2011 p. 4), a raw count of mother-tongue languages resulted in 19569 languages . These languages are artificially "rationalised" (Jinghran, 2009, p. 264) into 121 language groups. Of the 270 mother tongues across the country, only 17 are considered as a medium of instruction in primary schools (NCERT, 2002). Grouping and subsuming entire dialects, languages, and cultures under broader artificial categories, often defined in nonlinguistic terms, leads to children's languages being rejected in the school. Regional languages are usually entirely different from the child's home language (Menon, 2017; Mohanty, Mishra, Reddy & Gumidyala, 2009; Panda, 2004), leading to incomprehension and low literacy in children from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The question is, then, whether this changes through the process of schooling. Studies that have examined teachers' beliefs about language hierarchy and the validity of students' cultural identities reveal that teachers consider the medium of instruction to be "correct" and "pure" (Menon et al., 2017). In contrast, children's languages are dismissed as "incorrect," "impure," and irrelevant (Menon et al., 2017). p. 96–101). Power dynamics and the need for "efficiency" in developing generalizable state education strategies and curricula further entrench the child in a quagmire of alienation and marginalization.

A Snapshot of the Classroom

The Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL, (Menon et al., 2017) study engaged in a five-year longitudinal project sponsored by Tata Trusts and collaborators QUEST, Kalikae, and Azim Premji University in Wada in Maharashtra and Yadgir in Karnataka, to comprehend how primary school literacy is taught in two underprivileged regional sites in India, with two different regional languages: Marathi and Kannada. The study found that literacy within the early years of learning is almost entirely focused on rote and decoding practices. Children are taught alphabets and must write these individual letters in their notebooks repeatedly. The study concluded the urgent need to equip teachers with pedagogy

that models comprehension, promotes oral communication, pedagogy that is "sensitized to the real-world context of learners", and promotes joyful learning (p. 132).

In the recently revamped curriculum adopted in three states, joyful learning (SSA, Karnataka, 2014) and self-driven learning are promoted; therefore, children are taught symbols, or letters, in segmented groups. However, the first words children learn are more often words that are based on complex Sanskritized vocabulary. Subsequently, children's first written words are complex vocabulary that they do not understand. Children are found to be silently copying these words and symbols into their exercise books (Subramaniam et al., 2017b). Vowel sounds are taught almost one year later in the program which implies that children are unable to form words that have meaning for them until they reach Grade Two.

Sinha (2012) observes that comprehension is often disregarded in schools where the primary focus is decoding. Comprehension based on critical thinking is lost with oversimplification of texts based on explanation and paraphrasing of the text by the teacher that erodes the coherence, meaning, and interest in the content. The LiRIL study similarly found that teachers read the stories in textbooks to children and followed the *samjhana* [explanatory] method (Subramaniam et al., 2017a); as teachers read a story, they explained each sentence and its meaning to the child. Even with stories written in the medium of instruction, teachers had to simplify and explain because the children could not comprehend the content due to the highly Sankritized and standardized language. The explanatory method is a common practice in present-day schools in India; there is no consideration that children may not be able to make their meaning of the language. Therefore, children are not equipped to develop critical comprehension. Stories are considered worthy of being in the curriculum because they are moralistic in content. Even when a story is intelligible to children, its relatability to the child's life and imagination is often negligible.

Children's lives as they know them are to be left outside the classroom door as they are compelled to submerge themselves in a language they do not understand, which makes them feel deficient. The LiRiL study (Menon et al., 2017) provides case studies of three children and concludes that while these children were knowledgeable in their home environment and were responsible individuals who knew their communities, at school, they

were considered incapable. In this way, within the classroom environment, children are robbed of their mode of thinking, expressing, sharing, communicating, knowing, and being. The school is linguistically, practically, and socioculturally devoid of the child's real world, just as the child, in school, is devoid of his/her identity.

Systemic Efforts in Literacy

Alarmed by the low literacy rates that continue to prevail post-RTE and the re-visioning of the system, including consideration of the enormous resources that it entailed, a series of systemic overhauls to address students' poor learning outcomes have been instituted. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2017) provides the following learning outcomes: a child in Class One "identifies characters and sequence of a story and asks questions about the story" (page 25), in Grade Two "expresses verbally her or his opinion (*sic*) and asks questions about the characters, storyline, etc., in English or home language" (p. 26) or in Grade Five "connects ideas that he/she has inferred, through reading and interaction, with his/ her personal experiences" (p. 30) and, in English, at the Upper Primary level a student is expected to "use his/her critical/thinking faculty to read between the lines and go beyond the text" (p. 33). However, the content in textbooks more often than not reflect dominant ideologies that do not cater to the needs of marginalized children (Bhattacharya, 2019; Syeed, 2018) and the development of thinking as promoted by the NCERT Learning Outcomes (2017). As the committee of MHRD (2005) reports, textbooks have an uneven focus where state and non-government school textbooks have "naturalized inequalities of caste, class, and gender" (p. i).

Early childhood language curricula across several states have been completely redesigned, favoring self-driven learning and learning-by-doing approaches (Nali Kali, 1995; see also Gowda et al., 2013). Teachers have subsequently been trained to learn how to use the new curricular materials or allow children to engage with the materials independently. While well-intentioned and massive in scale, these efforts have fallen short of their goals for the very reason that this top-down approach has instituted educational reform procedures without

taking account of teachers and their pedagogical practices. Elite private schools are no better when it is a concern with literacy. As one school advertises on its website, the pedagogy is multidimensional and promotes flexibility, which gives the learner ample opportunities to explore and discover. Analytic skills are nurtured in such schools. However, critical literacy, as practiced in countries like Australia and Canada, is not followed.

Teacher preparation programs continue to be lacking in terms of language and literacy pedagogy. For example, establishing that sociocultural contexts inform every child's learning is still not covered. Although teacher education has been overhauled, teacher training programs typically fail to build on ideas of literacy aims, *why* we teach language, and the study of multiple approaches to literacy pedagogy (Menon & Thirumalai, 2016).

Subsequently, critical thinking and criticality of the word and the world are unchartered territories in state-run teacher education programs in India. In an extensive empirical study on critical literacy for teacher trainees conducted in India in November 2009, the researcher (Iyer, 2010) found that the participants agreed that rote learning would not develop critical thinking. They acknowledged that a move beyond traditional modes of learning meant meaning-making and active participation with texts in a critical manner.

However, they reiterated the importance of textbook literacy and rote learning as advantages worth considering in the mass education system with a standardized examination system. The participants emphasized the importance of critical literacy yet were aware of the power dynamics involved in developing critical literacy. As some noted, critique does exist in the form of reflective thinking (iyer, 2010; Zacher- Pandya & Avila, 2014). Similar to research by Menon et al. (2017) this study indicates that teachers need to be trained to engage with critical literacy; curricular revisions and reform measures would not create a sustainable impact on the classroom unless situated in teacher professional development. In the recent National Policy on Education (2020), claims have been made on teaching languages through experiential pedagogies, through apps, and by weaving the cultural aspect through links to the theatre, films, poetry, and music. Much remains to be seen as to how these approaches will enable critical literacy.

Steps Toward Critical Literacy: In the Field and Academia

Academics and practitioners confronted with the vast and complex issues affecting children's literacy development in India have understood the irrelevance and potential harm of schooling when constructed as moral and vocational training ignoring the learner's intelligence and culture. Sinha (2019), for instance, advocates a fluid and collaborative literacy pedagogy where comprehension is considered to be central. Work toward critical literacy currently centers around pockets of pedagogical repositioning aimed at making schooling socioculturally relevant. Many researchers and organizations are working toward this. The *Organisation for Early Language Promotion* (OELP) has pioneered the *varna-samooha* method. It has a structure of teaching the 50+ alphasyllabaries of Indian languages based on children being able to use familiar, everyday language (Jayram, 2008). Rather than learning the symbols in Indian languages all at once, this grouping of symbols is based on introducing children to the symbols found in emotionally charged, high-frequency words. Matras, or vowel symbols, are taught from the very beginning, so that word composition and meaning-making remain the focus of sound–symbol correspondence. With this introduction to print, children encounter decoding as meaning-makers from the outset of their schooling experience.

Researchers (Panda & Mohanty, 2009) have undertaken ethnographic studies of communities to structure educational programs around community funds of knowledge. These programs analyzed communities' histories, practices, and cultures to determine the development of curricular materials and ways to anchor pedagogy and concept formation in culture. Their study found that bilingual/multilingual education programs that focus on the child's language and culture in the classroom have their students showing significant gains in achievement compared to traditional school programs (See also Mohanty, 2010). Besides, non- profit organizations like *Language and Learning Foundation* (Languageandlearning foundation.org) partners with state governments to develop multilingual education (MLE) programs across six states. Instruction draws on additive bilingualism and is in the children's

home language in the early grades. Instruction includes reading big books that the organization creates using community folklore and knowledge, which subsequently enrich the experiences of school-age children with cultural knowledge.

Academic institutions such as the Azim Premji University, a private university in Karnataka, have reoriented their institutional work in teacher education, with programs that focus explicitly on early years' literacy (APU, 2021). The Azim Premji Foundation works with state governments in teacher education with field institutes across 46 districts in six states, offering academic guidance to develop public school teachers' understanding of literacy and literacy pedagogy. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences began an Early Literacy Initiative that sought to use longitudinal literacy research to educate practitioners about why literacy development remains low and to advocate more effective pedagogies (TISS, 2017). Through resource material and courses, more teachers are enabled to be aware of children's sociocultural knowledge and create meaningful courses in literacy.

Work toward making classrooms culturally relevant by focusing on curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education is happening in small pockets and vast NGO outputs across the country. An example of a micro interventionist practice in Haryana, a state in India, by Sahani (2001) illustrates how her work with two children led to them being able to form narratives, acquire symbolic power, and create symbolic worlds (p. 27). Sahani (2001) argues that redefining critical literacy as creative literacy is required to reconceptualize schooling for young children in India's poverty-ridden areas, as it would empower them.

A Way Forward

Although there is some level of critical thinking encouraged within language and literature classrooms, critical literacy as a means of uncovering power, comprehending sociopolitical context, and unpacking ideologies of gender and caste is largely absent. While private, international, IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education), University of Cambridge-affiliated elite schools develop critical thinking through English Language and English Literature, neocolonial approaches constrain public schools to develop essential

reading and writing skills. There is little in terms of examining the issues of ideologies and power present in texts and discourses. NGO-supported schools and alternative schools focus their curricular and formal pedagogical efforts on establishing meaning, thereby making the language classroom and school experience relevant. Critical thinking discussions occur more through informal, reciprocal discussions in these spaces. Students are encouraged to discuss experiences, problems, and issues they face in "circle time" mediated by the teaching faculty. Issues of caste, religion, gender, experiences of discrimination are discussed through these conversations. Teachers ensure that this stems from children voicing their concerns, but such discussions draw on textbook-focused content. Therefore, these efforts typically preclude the activist principles that are advocated by critical literacy, and as Comber and Nixon (2009) observe, such literacy practices reaffirm the dominant ideologies and "bureaucratic demands" (p. 334). Literacy practices that reaffirm dominant ideologies can only be countered if there is a greater focus on meaning-making and text analysis of prescribed texts and as Sinha (2012) observes, adequate attention is paid to "critical education" as a means to promote equity in a democratic society.

Developing socio-cultural awareness in students as a means of critical engagement remains the next step toward critical literacy. At a systemic level, with curricula and pedagogy that emphasizes decoding the text, ensuring that students are equipped to construct meaning is now of national concern. In the recent National Education Policy (2020), higher-order cognitive capacities of critical thinking and problem-solving have been reiterated (p. 4). The policy affirms the importance of conceptual understanding and "to make space for critical thinking and more holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning" (p. 12).

Meaning-making and critical analysis appear to be almost lofty ideals to many practitioners countenanced with students' debilitating literacy scores. However, these resources must be developed in tandem with meaning-making, building on sociocultural awareness strongholds. As Lankshear and McLaren (1993) state, the contextual historical processes of becoming literate need to be considered if literacy is to shift into productive text analysis. Critical and postcritical perceptions that unpack social injustices of a prescriptive

literacy system that privilege some texts and discourses in education are required. We need to question the "historical origins" of practices and "whose interests are served by them " (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 94). The postcritical lens (Iyer, 2007) that is an iterative process is needed on how difference has been and continues to be subjected to marginalization in and through discourses.

Teacher training needs to take account of the subjectivities of students and comprehend the importance of social justice. Significantly, pedagogical practices need to decolonize from being textbook-oriented and teacher-controlled to teacher-facilitated discussions on real-world "texts" surrounding children. As Bhattacharya (2019) observes, textbooks need to be carefully examined to determine their suitability to all children and where it is not possible to use appropriate textbooks, teachers should "incorporate additional supplementary material for their students" (p. 676).

Alternative texts like the graphic novel, *Bhimayana*, promote discussion of socio-cultural and political issues such as caste and human rights (see Nayar, 2012) and need to be incorporated into teaching. As Majumdhar and Mooij (2011) observe, the current hierarchical control environment and a competitive meritocratic system needs to be dismantled. To achieve postcolonial, postcritical literacy (Iyer, 2007), as Lankshear and McLaren (1993, p. 415) insightfully state, "we need to make despair less salutary, and economic, social, racial, gender [and caste] equality politically conceivable and pedagogically possible."

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