

305 "The Challenges of Curriculum Decolonization within the Postcolonial Indian Context: a case study" under the symposium, "Disrupting Coloniality in Global Higher Education: Perspectives from the Borders"

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Even in the postcolonial contexts of the Global South, Universities as sites of knowledge production and dissemination had reinforced only colonial knowledge systems which involved a systemic exclusion of alternative epistemologies of categories like Indigenous people, gender, race, and sexuality. This is probably because decolonization has not been an easy process. This paper highlights the challenges of curriculum decolonization within the postcolonial Indian context with the English literature curriculum as a case. Citing the controversial removal of renowned Bengali author and activist, Mahasweta Devi and two Dalit authors' texts from the undergraduate English syllabus at Delhi University, this paper discusses how the internal ethnic, caste, class, religious, and gender-based divisions determine the voices that get incorporated within the "decolonized" curriculum versus the voices, that get excluded within the postcolonial Indian society. Thereby, this paper problematizes the act of curriculum decolonization within the internally diverse and hierarchical postcolonial context of India.

Full paper

Introduction:

Knowledge production in formalized education has carried the colonial legacy in its curriculum and pedagogy. Academic experts like Shahjahan et al. (2021) explicate the significance of decolonial work growing substantially among educators across the globe.

The global discourse on academic decolonization gained momentum when we, as democratic societies felt that the education system all around the world needed to decentre the Western canon, the Eurocentrism embedded in our reproduction and dissemination of knowledge.

Movements in the form of campaigns like the "Rhodes Must Fall" in Oxford, and student-driven campaigns like "Why is My Curriculum White?", and "Liberate My Degree" all specifically focus on the problem of the domination of Eurocentrism and lack of diversity in university curriculum.

Decolonial work began in the Global South with Ngugi Thiongo's call for decolonization in Nairobi, Kenya, and ideals of democratization in higher educational institutions, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University following the Constitutional values enshrined by B.R. Ambedkar in India.

The available literature on the reform of English studies in India tells us that the process of decolonization of the curriculum started in the 1980s and 1990s arising out of years of crisis debates because of the colonial legacy of the English curriculum. Indian, Australian, Caribbean, and even American writing in English was not part of the formal curriculum.

The widening of the repertoire of the English curriculum with a significant change in the syllabus was propelled by zonal workshops, reports, and recommendations of the University Grants Commission (UGC) panel and Curriculum Development Committees (CDC). However, which texts (especially with regard to Indian writing in English) get selected in the curriculum remains problematic.

This paper highlights the challenges of curriculum decolonization within the postcolonial Indian context with the English literature curriculum as a case. Citing the controversial removal of renowned Bengali author and activist, Mahasweta Devi and two Dalit authors' texts from the undergraduate English syllabus at Delhi University, this paper raises a critical question about the voices that get incorporated within the "decolonized" curriculum versus the voices, that get excluded within the postcolonial Indian society.

Controversy over Delhi University English Curriculum

In the context of postcolonial India, the curriculum reforms have been driven by a strong postcolonial sentiment. Ideologically speaking, the political left-oriented parties and right-oriented parties across the Indian states are driven by this postcolonial standpoint. However, based on their ideological orientation, the parties have their own interpretations of decolonization. Hence, decolonization has become a problematic process within the country. In recent years, critics have raised growing concern about decolonization in postcolonial India becoming closely aligned with the project of extreme right-wing nationalism. It has taken the shape of the 'saffronization' of the curriculum. (Gohain, 2022 as cited in Mukherjee, 2022).

This is reflected in the recent controversy over the English syllabi of the University of Delhi. Draupadi, a short story by renowned Bengali upper-caste writer and social activist Mahashweta Devi (translated into English by globally renowned academic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) was dropped from the English Literature syllabus of Delhi University. The story is about a tribal woman who is raped by Army officers. It was part of 'women's writings' papers in the English literature syllabus for the fifth semester and had been taught since 1999. No "academic logic" was provided for the action by the DU oversight committee responsible for curriculum revision. In the same way, two Dalit writers Bama Faustina Soosairaj's "Sangati" and Sukirtharani's "My Body" were also removed from the syllabus. These two texts also talked about caste and gender discrimination faced by Dalit women.

The reason DU senior administrators gave was that, these three texts portrayed gruesome sexual content and the Indian army in poor light. In support of their action, it was stated that they would like to include more empowering stories about Dalits and oppressed sections of society in the curriculum to show how people can overcome and rise above societal discrimination.

Critical Question

But isn't Mahashweta Devi's tribal Draupadi (Dopdi) modeled after the epic character, Draupadi of Mahabharata, empowering? Don't they both overcome the fear of being violated by patriarchy? This is a critical question to ponder in the light of the current controversy. As Dasgupta (2021) writes, "The removal of these three Dalit texts, Sangati, My Body and Draupadi from the syllabus for their gruesome sexual content and denigrating representation of the military, validates Toni Morrison's arguments about the power of literary texts as minefields, that can be more expository, explosive and dreadful than lethal weapons."

References

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