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# DECOLONIZING CURRICULUM IN INDIA: THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE UNDER NEP 2020

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## ABSTRACT

*The decolonization of curriculum has emerged as a critical concern in postcolonial education systems, particularly in India, where colonial legacies have historically shaped knowledge structures and pedagogical practices. This study examines the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in decolonizing the curriculum within the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Adopting a qualitative, document-based approach, the study analyzes policy provisions and existing scholarly literature to explore the integration of indigenous knowledge into formal education. The findings reveal that NEP 2020 promotes epistemic pluralism, inclusivity, and cultural relevance by advocating the incorporation of IKS across disciplines. However, challenges such as lack of implementation frameworks, limited teacher preparedness, and institutional constraints hinder effective execution. The study concludes that while NEP 2020 provides a strong foundation for curriculum transformation, sustained efforts are required to bridge the gap between policy and practice and to ensure meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge in Indian education.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Indian Education, Decolonization of Curriculum, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, NEP 2020, Curriculum Reform*

## INTRODUCTION

The discourse on curriculum reform in the 21st century has increasingly been shaped by the need to address historical imbalances in knowledge production and dissemination. In postcolonial societies such as India, formal education systems have long been influenced by colonial legacies that privileged Western epistemologies while marginalizing indigenous knowledge traditions. This has resulted in curricula that are often disconnected from local contexts, cultural realities, and lived experiences of learners (Chakravorty, 2026; Nagre & Panda, 2026). Consequently, the call for decolonizing the curriculum has gained significant momentum, emphasizing the need to reclaim, restore, and reintegrate indigenous knowledge systems into mainstream education.

Decolonization of curriculum is not merely an academic exercise but a transformative process aimed at epistemic justice, cultural revitalization, and inclusive knowledge construction. It seeks to challenge dominant knowledge hierarchies and recognize the legitimacy of diverse ways of knowing, particularly those rooted in local, indigenous, and community-based traditions (Mpuangnan & Govender, 2025). In the Indian context, this involves acknowledging the richness of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)—spanning disciplines such as philosophy, science, mathematics, medicine, ecology, language, and arts—and integrating them meaningfully into contemporary curricula (Roy, 2026; Kala, 2025).

The introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant turning point in this direction. The policy explicitly advocates for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, multilingual education, and culturally relevant pedagogy, thereby aligning educational reform with the broader goals of equity, inclusivity, and holistic development (Government of India, 2020). NEP 2020 envisions an education system that not only prepares learners for global competitiveness but also fosters a deep connection with India's cultural and intellectual heritage. Scholars argue that this policy represents a deliberate shift towards curricular decolonization, aiming to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern education (Dagore & Singh, 2026; Raza & Parween, 2025).

A key dimension of this shift is the integration of indigenous knowledge into curriculum design and pedagogy. Indigenous knowledge is inherently contextual, experiential, and sustainable, offering valuable insights into areas such as environmental conservation, community living, and holistic well-being. Its inclusion in formal education

can enhance relevance, promote cultural identity, and support inclusive learning environments, particularly for marginalized and tribal communities (Bania, 2025; Anowar & Khatun, 2024). Furthermore, embedding IKS within curricula aligns with global educational trends that advocate for pluralistic and culturally responsive education systems.

However, the process of decolonizing the curriculum in India is not without challenges. Issues such as lack of standardized frameworks for integrating IKS, insufficient teacher preparedness, institutional resistance, and the risk of romanticizing or essentializing indigenous knowledge pose significant barriers (Jyotishi, 2025; Parmar, 2026). Moreover, there exists a critical tension between maintaining academic rigor and incorporating diverse knowledge systems in a way that is both authentic and pedagogically effective. These challenges necessitate a nuanced and critical approach to curriculum reform, one that balances tradition with modernity and local relevance with global standards.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to critically examine the role of indigenous knowledge in decolonizing the curriculum in India within the framework of NEP 2020. It explores the conceptual foundations of curricular decolonization, analyzes policy provisions related to IKS, and identifies key opportunities and challenges in their implementation. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing academic discourse on curriculum transformation and provide insights for developing a more inclusive, contextually relevant, and epistemologically diverse education system in India.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to explore the decolonization of curriculum in India with special reference to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) under NEP 2020. The key objectives are:

1. To examine the conceptual foundations of curriculum decolonization in the Indian educational context.
2. To analyze the provisions of NEP 2020 regarding the integration of Indigenous/Indian Knowledge Systems into the curriculum.
3. To explore the role of indigenous knowledge systems in promoting inclusive, culturally relevant, and holistic education.
4. To identify the major challenges and barriers in implementing a decolonized curriculum in India.
5. To suggest strategies for effective integration of indigenous knowledge within the curriculum in alignment with NEP 2020.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to examine the decolonization of curriculum in India, with particular focus on the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The research is primarily based on secondary data, drawing upon a wide range of sources including official policy documents, especially NEP 2020, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports related to curriculum studies and indigenous knowledge. A document analysis method has been employed to systematically review and interpret these sources. The collected data have been analyzed using a thematic approach, enabling the identification of key themes such as curriculum decolonization, inclusion of indigenous knowledge, cultural relevance, equity, and challenges in implementation. The study follows an interpretive analytical framework to critically engage with policy discourse and existing literature. However, as the research is limited to conceptual and policy-level analysis without empirical investigation, it may not fully capture ground-level realities; thus, further empirical studies are recommended to complement and validate the findings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of policy documents and existing literature reveals that the decolonization of curriculum in India, particularly under the framework of NEP 2020, is both a transformative and complex process. The findings are organized around key thematic areas that reflect the objectives of the study.

**1. Shift Towards Epistemic Pluralism and Curriculum Decolonization**

One of the most significant findings is that NEP 2020 marks a clear departure from historically dominant, colonial-centric curricula toward epistemic pluralism. The policy explicitly recognizes the value of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and advocates their integration across disciplines. This shift reflects an attempt to democratize knowledge by validating diverse epistemologies, thereby addressing long-standing imbalances in curriculum design. However, while the policy intent is progressive, its translation into practice remains uneven and requires systemic restructuring.

**2. Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)**
The study finds that IKS holds strong potential for making education more contextual, experiential, and culturally relevant. Indigenous knowledge—rooted in local traditions, ecological wisdom, and community practices—can enrich curriculum content and pedagogy. NEP 2020 encourages such integration in areas like environmental education, health, arts, and language learning. Despite this, the absence of a standardized framework or curricular models for integrating IKS poses a significant challenge. Institutions often lack clarity on how to embed indigenous perspectives without compromising academic rigor.

**3. Promotion of Inclusive and Equitable Education**
Another key finding is that the inclusion of indigenous knowledge contributes to greater inclusivity and equity in education. By incorporating local languages, traditions, and cultural narratives, the curriculum becomes more accessible to learners from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, particularly those from tribal and marginalized communities. This aligns with NEP 2020's vision of equitable education. However, disparities in infrastructure, digital access, and institutional capacity continue to limit the effective realization of these goals, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

**4. Pedagogical Transformation and Teacher Preparedness**
The integration of IKS necessitates a shift from traditional, content-driven teaching to context-sensitive and experiential pedagogy. The findings indicate that teachers play a critical role in this transformation, yet many lack the necessary training and exposure to indigenous knowledge frameworks. This highlights a gap between policy aspirations and teacher preparedness. Without targeted professional development programs, the effective implementation of a decolonized curriculum remains constrained.

**5. Challenges and Structural Barriers**
The study identifies several challenges in implementing curriculum decolonization. These include:

- ⇒ Lack of curricular guidelines and instructional materials
- ⇒ Institutional resistance to change
- ⇒ Risk of superficial or tokenistic inclusion of indigenous knowledge
- ⇒ Tension between global academic standards and local knowledge systems

These challenges suggest that decolonization is not merely a curricular adjustment but requires systemic reform across educational structures, including assessment practices, teacher education, and institutional policies.

**6. Balancing Tradition and Modernity**
A critical discussion emerging from the findings is the need to balance traditional knowledge with contemporary academic demands. While IKS offers valuable insights, its integration must be approached critically to avoid romanticization or uncritical acceptance. A dialogic approach that encourages interaction between indigenous and modern knowledge systems is essential for developing a robust and future-ready curriculum.

The findings suggest that NEP 2020 provides a strong conceptual foundation for decolonizing the Indian curriculum, but its success depends on effective implementation strategies, institutional readiness, and continuous critical engagement. The integration of indigenous knowledge has the potential to transform education into a more inclusive, relevant, and holistic system. However, achieving this requires bridging the gap between policy and practice through structured frameworks, teacher training, and sustained academic discourse.
In essence, curriculum decolonization in India is an ongoing process rather than a completed reform, demanding collaborative efforts from policymakers, educators, and researchers to ensure that it leads to meaningful and sustainable educational transformation.

## CONCLUSION

The present study highlights that the decolonization of curriculum in India, particularly in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, represents a significant shift toward creating a more inclusive, contextually relevant, and epistemologically diverse education system. By emphasizing the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), NEP 2020 attempts to move beyond colonial legacies and recognize the richness and validity of India's own knowledge traditions. This shift not only strengthens cultural identity but also enhances the relevance of education for learners from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

The findings of the study indicate that the incorporation of indigenous knowledge has the potential to promote holistic learning, experiential understanding, and sustainable thinking, aligning well with global educational priorities while maintaining local relevance. At the same time, it contributes to the broader goals of equity and inclusion by making the curriculum more accessible and meaningful, particularly for marginalized and underrepresented communities.

However, the study also underscores that the process of curriculum decolonization is fraught with challenges. Issues such as lack of clear implementation frameworks, inadequate teacher preparedness, institutional

constraints, and the risk of superficial integration of indigenous knowledge need to be carefully addressed. Without systematic efforts in curriculum design, teacher education, and policy execution, the transformative vision of NEP 2020 may remain only partially realized.

In conclusion, decolonizing the curriculum is not a one-time reform but a continuous and evolving process that requires critical engagement, interdisciplinary dialogue, and collaborative efforts among educators, researchers, and policymakers. A balanced approach that integrates indigenous knowledge with contemporary academic standards can pave the way for a more equitable, culturally grounded, and future-oriented education system in India. Further empirical research is recommended to explore ground-level practices and develop actionable strategies for effective implementation.

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