# Meritocracy versus Elitism: Transition of Knowledge and Curriculum from Colonial Indian Society to 75th Year of Indian Independence

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## *Abstract*

*While celebrating Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav on the eve of 75th year of Indian Independence and 3rd anniversary of National Policy on Education 2020, which was framed after long 24 years since the previous one, we must trace the history of knowledge production through relations shared by edifices of knowledge. The transition of knowledge and curriculum since colonial period till today contributes to the understandings of power relations, structure of society and evolution of curriculum that are the fundamentals in understanding of the Indian education system. The present study investigates how economic and political power relations influence framing of curriculum and that eventually becomes effective in the process of knowledge production. The article is an outcome of intensive literature review about the education system in colonial era and simultaneously different secondary sources of data has been consulted to know the evolution of our education system and its transition from British period. The primary aim of imperial agencies was to spread religious education and maintain cheap supply of English educated Indians. So meritorious students got privileged because of their educational achievements and English educated affluent Indians became elites who controlled entire education system. Thus meritocracy always contributed to the rise of elitism. In fact the Elitists and the meritocrats enjoyed the opportunities largely but could not contribute much either to the development or to the spread of education in all the strata of Indian society. Education for all always remained a distant dream in spite of several movements by our patriots. It is only after the end of last millennium universal education system was paid attention to and vernacular languages got impetus. The present education system too working in the direction of narrowing down social gap as NEP2020 emphasizes on participation of all within the arena of inclusive educational structure.*

*Keywords: Colonial education system, Curriculum, Elitism, Imperial agencies, Knowledge, Meritocracy, Power relations, Structure of society.*

## Introduction

As a subject matter of Educational Sociology society plays an important role in determining aims and objective of Education as well as curriculum. Societal expectation, values, norms and traditions determine the goal of education which is a social process. In our social structure there are always authorities whose power to influence is seen as legitimate. That is how power, structure of society and education are interrelated.

The colonial conquest led to the fall of Indian education system. To control the administration the need for educating the Indians became a necessity to procure manpower. As a consequence different strategies were devised to form British influenced Indian education system. Charter Act in 1813 [1]declared that annual sum of one lakh to be given to Christian missionaries to spread religious education. Macauley's Minutes (1835) [2]reinforced the fact that English should be medium of education and western sciences and English literature were to be given primary importance in the curriculum. It aimed to educate a small section of upper and middle classes who would become bridge between the masses and government and through them there will be downward filtration of knowledge. Wood's Despatch (1854)[3] , the Magna Carta was actually a comprehensive plan for political training to princes and elites. Hereby also it was made clear that at school level vernacular

was acceptable but for higher studies English was made compulsory. Hunter Commission (1882) [4]though considered development of mass education, women education, vocational education and allowed vernacular languages to be used as medium of education but little could be changed as far as dominance of English in education system was concerned.

Sadler Commission (1917-19) [5]and Hartlog Commission (1929) [6]though were constituted to maintain cheap supply of English educated Indians but they also made sure only deserving students get entry in high schools and restricted admission to universities. In 1937 Indian National Congress in their Wardha Scheme (1937) [7]tried to bring the concept of basic education by proposing the scheme of learning through activities. Basically it was thought to be regional craft centered education, whereby learners would learn different subjects by working with the craft, the scheme ensured experiential learning where there would be no discrimination or privilege offered to anyone in the system. But the elites of our country did not accept the fact that their children and someone ordinary would be receiving same education being part of the same team (working with the craft) without being highlighted. So the very spirit of basic education conceived by Gandhiji was rejected because the practice of elitism in education was thought to be threatened by that.

The primary aim of imperial agencies was to spread religious education and maintain cheap supply of English educated Indians. Meritorious students got privileged because of their achievements and English educated affluent communities became the so called 'elites' who controlled Indian education system (Sen, 2016). Education never was for all in British ruled India. After the independence also that trend continued. It is only after the end of last millennium that universal education system was paid attention to and vernacular languages got impetus from Government of India. Later on it was understood that the ever broadening social gap can only be countered by ensuring participation of all making India inclusive in the sphere of education.

The ideology and interest of people on power affect curriculum. The corporate capitalist economy assigns high status to certain branches of knowledge like mathematics and science. Educational system selects and allocates people for future roles as the functions of education are both maintenance and renewal of social structure. Differential allocation of opportunities leads to social inequality and social stratification. As an agent of social change education changes the social organizations cum interactions through Sanskritization, westernization and modernization. Elites suppress their subordinate groups in a system which is supposed to support all. Meritocracy legitimizes the system of unfairness and again upholds the fact that the system is fair.

## Research Questions:

1. How do power and structure of society influence curriculum?
2. Why elitism in curriculum was found not suitable for development of education in India?
3. How does meritocracy in education system give rise to social inequality?
4. What should be done for manifestation of equalization of educational opportunities in India?

## Methodology:

The present study is an outcome of thorough literature review on transition of knowledge and curriculum in India over the years (prior to British age to the modern times). Consulting the secondary sources of information in form of books, journals both online and offline, various govt. reports over the years it has been tried to develop an understanding from analysis of the important events which has helped in finding answers to the research questions framed. The study traces the causes of inequality in educational opportunities created by elitism and meritocracy in curriculum and identifies the efforts being made to resolve those issues of concern and also map the road ahead in making the distant dream of quality and universal education come true for all the Indians.

1  annually 1, 00,000 rupees was allotted for literary development of British India by East India Company.
2 memorandum of Indian Education proposed in favour of Anglicists praising western culture and British Education system in India
3 popularizing use of English in India to supply civil servants to East India Company
4 assess the state off Education in India from primary to higher education
5 enquire the prospects of Universities
6 survey the development of education in India
7 Gandhiji's proposal for free and compulsory education in mother tongue

## Discussion:

Power, structure of society and curriculum: Like all other societies our one is also arranged in a certain pattern. Education trains individuals for allocation of human resource for future roles. Now in a society which is unequal, having power over others people have interest in suppressing others. Conflict of interest    in social structure gives rise to social stratification. Education facilitates socio economic mobility to bring social change. So, our society has expectation of school product. Society influence as well as develop nature of curriculum. In today's corporate capitalist economy powerful ones in the society impose their own ideologies on the system, which are then considered legitimate in the social structure.  As we know, education, knowledge and curriculum are instrumental in renewal of social structure. With education economic development brings improvement in standard of living and thus social change takes place.

## Era of Elitism:

a. Ancient India: In ancient India education used to be imparted through Gurukul system. Here students used to live in the gurukul i.e. at the residence of the guru and acquire knowledge from the master. At the same time the learners used to acquire knowledge and participate in daily chores of the place. Education was available only for the upper caste Brahmins and for descendants of the royal family. The lower strata of society did not have opportunity to attain knowledge. Education system was gender biased. In the Vedic system though some women were very famous who acquired knowledge and became great scholars. So education was the luxury of few and others simply were out of the sphere of education.

b. British era: With the advent of British in India our education system got a complete makeover. The indigenous system suffered a setback. The Gurukuls and other various religious educational institutions started losing significance and become irrelevant as English medium schools started to be opened under Christian missionary control. The motto was to manufacture English educated native clerks to help in the administration. Grants used to be distributed to educational institutions where trained teachers were recruited to impart education that was influenced by British culture. Mostly the educational scenario used to be dominated by the upper class people of the society. Some meritorious students were also awarded with scholarships as well as jobs. So, English educated high salaried elitist Indians became role models and command over English language became a dearly wished status symbol.

c. Advantages: Elitism contributed to growth of education in India, benefits of their upward movement in societal ladder trickled down which  touched the lives of others, native people got introduced to western culture and education and thus the elites started contributing towards positive change in the society. Elites proved to be tools for empowerment of the disadvantaged; they had shown ability in being instrumental in upward social mobility of the disempowered (Sutoris, 2018). The transformational benefits started to be realized in every sectors, the elites thus produced by the system to a great extent took the responsibility of educating the native people.

The positive effects of practice of meritocracy can be traced in Indian knowledge system through the contributions of Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Rishi Aurobindo and many more eminent personalities. They all were born in elitist families, being privileged in society they received formal and informal education. They served the country with their gathered knowledge and inspired the countrymen with profound wisdom against British rule.

d. Disadvantages: Elitists captured the control of education and a small powerful group started to control the entire education system. Power corrupts and the then educated elitists entrusted with great responsibility to supervise always used their power for selfish ends,  people suffered from inaccessibility to opportunities and fair chances to success almost disappeared from the system. Now a day also Centers of educational excellence often prioritize admission of previous alumni's families. Historically upper section and affluent families influence admission by financial means. Donations and connections both are equally responsible in this.

Thus the system suffered from lack of eligible candidates to serve the developmental demands. Soon it

started to be felt that the society got divided and is composed of people of different strata. Discrimination and systematic barriers prevent talented minority students reaching their full potential. Less representation of country's population undermine opportunities for them in higher education and that creates legacy of discrimination which is unconstitutional and certainly should be checked (Business Standard. 17th Nov, 2020). The development of people of all strata only could push upliftment of the country as a whole influencing positive social change across the nation.

### Transition to Meritocracy:

a. Various welfare schemes for the underserved : After Independence for the sake of development of education system Central Advisory Board of India (appointed by Govt. of India) on advise of the Planning Commission set up University Education Commission (1948) and Mudaliar Commission (1952)* [8] to reconstruct the education system in tune with the vision of Indian constitution. Later Kothari Commission (1964-66)** [9] put stress on National Education System and following the same National Education Policy (1968) was devised. At much later phase, the National Policy on Education 1986 seemed to be focused on removal of disparity and aimed to equalize educational opportunities for women, SC and ST Communities.

1986 policy on education started working on District Institute of Education and Training (DIETs), Colleges of Education (CTEs), Institute of Advanced Study in Education (IASEs), State Council of Educational Research And Training (SCERTs) which all were efforts in weakening democratic ways of selection of people making education free from the control of upper class by strengthening organizations and bringing equality in opportunities.

District Primary Education Programme (1994)[10] , Mid-Day Meal Scheme (1995)[11] under National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education have been ways of bringing underserved students to school and retain them there or a considerable period of time.

Sarva Siksha Abhiyan(2001)[12] was launched to achieve the objective of universal primary education irrespective of caste, creed and religion. All these were the steps taken to bring all in the path of progress and development. In 86th constitutional amendment act 2002 article 21-A as added where by the states were directed to provide free and compulsory education to all children between 6-14years. Article 51-A was laid out as duty to every citizen who is a parent to provide opportunities for education to their child between 6-14 years. Thus right was balanced with responsibility judiciously.

Article 45 of Directive Principles of State Policy endeavored to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of 6 years. Special care was gien to avoid any possibility of leaving anyone unserved.

Right to education act enacted on 2009 came into being to ensure free and compulsory education for all from 6-14 years. This sincerely revolutionized the so far ongoing process as created record in gross school enrollment.

Rastiya Madhyamik Siksha Abhiyan (2009)[13] , Sakshar Bharat (2009), Rastriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (2019) [14], Samagra Shiksha Abhiyaan took SSA, RMSA, Teacher Education under one umbrella.

The latest comprehensive framework NEP 2020[15] which has become the talk of the town plans to transform elementary education to higher education including vocational training in both rural and urban areas.

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8 constituted to promote development of secondary education in India

9 implementation of three language formula  for development od education in India

10 develop the quality of primary education with 100% enrollment and building new school.

11 Initiative to increase enrollment, attendance and reduce dropout rates

12  initiative to attain universal access to education

13  initiative to improve quality and access to secondary education.

14  initiative to improve quality, equality and access in higher education.

15  educational policy to promote Indian education system rooted in our ethos to transform India

b. Advantages: Meritocratic system rewards merit, it does not consider social standing of elites but put forward merit as the single most criteria for selection to positions. Meritocracy in India has done a lot with regard to removing discrimination inception. Irrespective of cast, creed,and equalizing opportunities since economic position and religion meritocracy puts emphasis on hard work, human talent, skills and ability. Meritocracy encourages healthy competition and brings forward the efficiency and effectiveness of people i.e. it prioritizes performance at the time of need. We enjoy the benefits of public examination, public service commission as fruits of meritocracy in education system

c. Disadvantages: It has been seen after independence through the implementation of several five-year plans that curriculum based education system is tilted towards rich, urban and higher class students.  Winners and losers are identified by merit in mastering a curriculum fails to alleviate social inequality and thus hereditary meritocracy privileges the socially advantaged ones replicating prior elitism based hierarchy of the system (Roy Chowdhury & Keane 2021). Merit camouflages rising inequality (Geetha, 2022). As material rewards for human talent compels individuals for doing their best subsequently an environment of fierce competition displace equality and egalitarian aspect of society, unequal distribution of resources widens gaps. Success becomes talent and failures remain as mere sign of personal defect.

It justifies the stratification of society, justifies the backwardness of people with less merit compared to the people with intelligence. It ignores and disregards the fact that merit is supported by some kind of pre requisite facilities and not all in the economic hierarchy can do justice to their merit because other social obstacles often hold them back.

## Meritocracy versus Elitism:

Meritocracy lowers the elitist control in the system but does not always follow the legitimacy. In course of time meritocracy turns to elitism and small section of meritocratic people get control of the whole society. People who have poor resources end up last in the race in spite of their effort and the well offs simply use their background to excel in the competition in spite of absence of merit and talent. Contemporary phenomenon like job scam, nepotism reinforce the fact that it is not harmless.

Nationwide decrease in standard of living and increasing inequality are often blamed on the curse of reservation system but minute analysis of facts would tell global capitalist phenomenon are to be questioned not the system of reservation. Affordability is a prerequisite to acquire merit and social, economic and cultural forms of capital encompass merit.

Since independence it was tried to cater to the needs of elite's children. The society had different motives in educating the masses and educating the elites. Segregated socialization has always been promoted (Sutoris, 2018). The economic status of the parents became determinant in selection of schools for admission where meritocratic admission tests make way for judging certain etiquette and skills together with fluency in English (Kumar 1985). Cosmopolitan attitude, family background and fluency in English all act as coded criteria of filtering. Thus admission to schools became biased towards upper castes, rich and urban children. Besides private educational organizations charge high tuition fees and inadvertently welcome elite's children only to take admissions (7th Sept., 2015, The Economic Times). Poor and low caste families choose government schools and after passing out they head towards low ranking jobs or low ranking institutes for further studies. This is how our education system is operated by market economy and is skewed against the marginalized sections of the society.

## Need of Egalitarian Education System:

Be it meritocracy or elitism, they contribute to unfairness. Education for all, enrollment of all, retention of all in the system is actually what should be the outcome of our education system. The upper class must not be able to control education system as well as the handful of meritorious students can not only get protection against life's challenges. Actually everyone is trying to do better than yesterday; all should be given chance to try out their

hands on better opportunities.

Families that had been systematically excluded from mainstream are given reservation to rectify injustices seems to be no longer necessary as are perversions of principles of meritocracy (Basu Roy, 2023). This is fundamentally unfair as individuals from non-reserved categories are denied admission. Certainly reinforcement of caste identities are hindrance to social mobility and education the greatest means of social change must not promote that. Rather economic quota system may come into existence that considers financial circumstances. A truly meritocratic system ensures fair distribution of opportunities preventing systematic barriers and promoting social mobility. Acceptance of cultural pluralism, becoming multicultural society paves the way for development of multicultural curriculum that supports assimilation of knowledge and abolition of hierarchy and stratification.

## Conclusion

 The present focus of the country's education system is to treat all equally without offering special status or privilege to anyone. Education aims to abolish social rigidity and remove discrimination based on birth. This is the way to destroy stratification and achieve higher ideals. Curriculum development should always put utmost importance to composition of society and reflection of all section of society in education only then good permanent values can be inculcated to the generations to come.

NEP 2020 emphasizes upon Learning for all ideology inculcating inclusive educational structure and culture in school system. Curriculum now is planned to incorporate human values with infrastructural support. Segregation and isolation of ethnic and linguistic minorities are to be stopped for ever; people with disabilities must no more face learning difficulty due to language an infrastructural barrier. In this new dawn too access of all, participation of all will continue to be a major challenge in bringing positive learning outcomes (Ghosh, 2023).

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