



Freedom from Colonial Influence: The “Swadeshi Education” Thought of Indian Thinkers and the De-colonization of Contemporary Indian Education

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Abstract:

This research paper analyses the nature of the colonial education system introduced during British rule and evaluates the relevance of the “Swadeshi education” philosophy proposed by eminent Indian thinkers as an alternative. The educational framework initiated in India through Macaulay’s Minute of 1835 primarily aimed at creating psychological subjugation and cultural alienation among Indians. Identifying the limitations of this mechanical and examination-oriented system, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo articulated alternative life-oriented and nationalist educational philosophies. Tagore’s nature-centric education, Gandhi’s Nai Talim, Vivekananda’s “man-making education,” and Aurobindo’s Integral Education all shared a common goal—the decolonization of education.

The present study finds that India’s National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) seeks to bring about a transformative shift away from the Macaulayan framework. By emphasizing mother-tongue instruction, revitalizing Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), and incorporating vocational education, the policy reflects the long-cherished “Swadeshi” vision of these thinkers. Through an analysis of both challenges and possibilities, the paper concludes that decolonization is not merely a reflection on the past but an essential process for reclaiming India’s identity and enhancing its global competitiveness. By integrating theoretical insights with policy perspectives, this study outlines a future roadmap for India’s education system.

Keywords: De-colonization, Indigenous Education, Nai Talim, Macaulayism, National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).

1. Introduction:

A review of the history of modern education in India reveals a deep scar, the roots of which lie in Lord Macaulay’s famous *Minute on Education* passed in the British Parliament in 1835. Macaulay’s objective was very specific—to create in India a class of people who would be Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, and morals (Macaulay, 1835). This “Macaulayism” imposed a form of *colonialism of the mind* by rejecting India’s thousands-of-years-old epistemological traditions. Making English the compulsory medium of education and labelling indigenous languages as “inferior” were the main driving forces of this system. As a result, a vast gap emerged between the educated class and the larger population of India, which sociologists have described as “cultural alienation” (Basu, 1982).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, India's great political thinkers raised their voices against this enslaving education system. For them, freedom did not merely mean political independence; it also signified cultural and spiritual regeneration. Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo—each, from their own philosophical standpoint—proposed a “Swadeshi” or indigenous model of education as an alternative to the structure introduced by Macaulay.

Swami Vivekananda defined education as “the manifestation of the perfection already in man” (Vivekananda, 1907). He believed that any education that does not enable a person to stand on their own feet is not true education. On the other hand, Rabindranath Tagore held that education should take place in the open environment of nature and be connected with a universal humanistic spirit (Tagore, 1917). Mahatma Gandhi's *Nai Talim* was a socio-economic alternative model of education centered on the dignity of labour and handicrafts (Gandhi, 1937). Sri Aurobindo elevated this discourse to a spiritual level by proposing the idea of *Integral Education*, where the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of a learner develop harmoniously (Aurobindo, 1956). The common thread among these great thinkers was clear—to reconnect education with India's land, people, and culture.

The term “decolonization” does not merely mean the departure of colonial rulers; rather, it involves removing colonial influences from every level of education—curriculum, language, and methods of assessment. For a long time, India's education system was structured in such a way that students knew more about the River Thames than about the heroes of their own country. This system fostered a culture of rote learning instead of creativity. According to modern postcolonial theorists, decolonizing education represents a form of *epistemic liberation*, through which a nation can reclaim its lost identity (Kumar, 2005).

Although efforts were made in the decades following independence to reform India's education policy, its fundamental structure remained largely colonial. However, the *National Education Policy 2020* has ushered in a new era in the history of Indian education. This policy clearly reflects the spirit of decolonization. The emphasis on mother-tongue instruction at the primary level, inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems, and promotion of vocational education for self-reliance are, in essence, modern adaptations of the “Swadeshi education” ideas proposed by earlier thinkers (Ministry of Education, 2020). The current Indian government aims to shape education not merely as a means of livelihood but as a tool for national integration and global competitiveness.

The primary objective of this research paper is to present a comparative analysis of Macaulay's influence on India's education system over the past two centuries and the alternative models proposed by Indian political thinkers. The study seeks to answer two key questions: first, to what extent have the “Swadeshi education” ideas of these thinkers been incorporated into contemporary Indian education policy? And second, whether the *National Education Policy 2020* can truly free India from Macaulay's colonial legacy. This discussion is highly relevant for present-day students, educators, and policymakers, as it provides the intellectual foundation for building a self-respecting and “self-reliant” India.

2. Nature and Limitations of the Colonial Education System:

In the history of India's education system, the colonial period is regarded as a dark chapter, whose primary objective was to destroy India's indigenous epistemological foundations and serve the interests of the British Empire. The institutional framework that emerged with the introduction of Lord Macaulay's education policy in 1835 stood in complete contrast to India's traditional systems of *pathshalas*, *tols*, and *madrasas*. In this section, we examine the nature of that system and its multiple limitations.

At the core of British educational philosophy was the idea of “European superiority.” In his famous *Minute*, Thomas Babington Macaulay claimed that a single shelf of a European library was more valuable than all Indian or Arabic literature (Macaulay, 1835). From this extremely racist and narrow perspective emerged the

“Filtration Theory.” The British aimed to educate a small section of the Indian elite in English so that they could act as intermediaries between the colonial administration and the masses. As a result, education ceased to be a means of acquiring knowledge and instead became a tool of social division (Basu, 1982).

One of the most harmful aspects of the colonial education system was the imposition of English as the compulsory medium of instruction. Language is not merely a means of communication; it is the carrier of a nation’s culture. When a foreign language becomes the sole medium of education, learners become detached from their roots and traditions. This strategy led to the neglect of Indian languages and indigenous literature. Rabindranath Tagore strongly criticized this approach, arguing that education in a foreign language cripples a student’s thinking ability and reduces them to a mechanical being (Tagore, 1917). The marginalization of the mother tongue made it nearly impossible for education to reach the masses, significantly delaying literacy in India.

The system introduced by the British was highly theoretical and disconnected from real life. Its primary aim was to produce a class of clerks for administrative work. Lord Curzon himself admitted at the 1904 education conference that the Indian education system was overly theoretical and lacked vocational or technical training (Nurullah & Naik, 1951). Consequently, Indians began to value clerical jobs over manual labour or handicrafts. Mahatma Gandhi sharply criticized this model, stating that it failed to integrate the hand, head, and heart (Gandhi, 1937). The absence of technical education contributed to transforming India from a producer economy into a supplier of raw materials and a market for foreign goods.

Creativity and independent thinking had no place in the colonial education system. The curriculum was designed in such a way that rote learning became the key to success. In pursuit of degrees and certificates, students memorized content without understanding it, distancing themselves from true knowledge. This led to intellectual stagnation. Sri Aurobindo criticized this mechanical system, stating that it suppressed the inner development of students and turned them into burdens on society (Aurobindo, 1924).

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of colonial education was the psychological inferiority it instilled among Indians. Textbooks glorified British history, science, and heroism while portraying Indian civilization as backward and primitive. This “colonialism of the mind” forced Indians to believe in the superiority of the West over the East. Swami Vivekananda described this system as “negative education,” noting that it made students feel ashamed of their own heritage, thereby weakening the backbone of the nation (Vivekananda, 1907).

Macaulay’s “Filtration Theory” also led to the emergence of a new English-educated elite class, which considered itself superior to the largely illiterate masses of farmers and labourers. This deepened social divisions and weakened social cohesion. Moreover, the British government showed little interest in women’s education, as their focus was on producing male administrative workers. As a result, investment in female education remained minimal, creating gender inequality that hindered India’s overall progress (Kumar, 2005).

In essence, the colonial education system served as an ideological foundation for sustaining British imperialism. It prioritized control and obedience over the dissemination of knowledge. The legacy of Macaulay left a deep scar on Indian society, making it imperative to break free from its influence. These limitations later inspired India’s great thinkers to envision a new, “Swadeshi” model of education. As contemporary India moves toward decolonizing education, overcoming this colonial legacy remains a central objective.

3. The “Swadeshi Education” Thought of Indian Thinkers: A Philosophical Reappraisal:

The “Swadeshi education” movement initiated by Indian political thinkers against the mechanical nature and cultural aggression of colonial education was not merely a political resistance; rather, it was a profound

philosophical effort to reclaim India's self-identity. In this section, we reassess the educational philosophies of four major Indian thinkers in light of their original writings.

Mahatma Gandhi regarded the decolonization of education as the foundation of political freedom. At the Wardha Education Conference in 1937, he proposed his famous model of *Basic Education* or *Nai Talim*. The core principle of Gandhi's philosophy was that education must be life-oriented and closely linked with productive labour (Gandhi, 1937). He believed that bookish knowledge alone cannot ensure the holistic development of a student's personality. Therefore, he emphasized activities such as spinning, agriculture, and handicrafts as central to education. The philosophical basis of this approach lay in the integration of the "three Hs"—Hand, Head, and Heart. For Gandhi, education was a tool for achieving *Swaraj* or self-reliance. He envisioned schools becoming financially self-sufficient through their own productive activities, a direct contrast to the colonial bureaucratic system (Gandhi, 1938). He strongly argued that education in a foreign language was causing "spiritual and intellectual paralysis" among Indians, and that only the mother tongue could nurture original thinking.

Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy was more aesthetic and universal compared to Gandhi's. He believed that education should take place in the open lap of nature and in close association with the arts. In his view, education meant liberation from the prison-like confines of classroom walls (Tagore, 1917). He emphasized overcoming the alienation between humans and nature created by colonial education. His goal was to revive the *Tapovan* ideal at Santiniketan. Learning in nature, he argued, enhances the sensitivity of students. According to him, "education is meaningful only when it occurs through joy" (Tagore, 1921). The development of emotional intelligence through music, painting, and dance was central to his Santiniketan and Visva-Bharati model. Tagore opposed narrow nationalism and envisioned India presenting its spiritual heritage to the world while embracing Western science. His Visva-Bharati was conceived as a meeting ground of the East and the West.

Swami Vivekananda defined education as "the manifestation of the perfection already in man" (Vivekananda, 1907). His philosophy centered on spiritual strength and character building. He criticized Macaulay's system as "negative education" because it focused only on criticism and not on constructive growth. He envisioned an education that would strengthen willpower and produce heroic individuals. Vivekananda believed that India needed a synthesis of Eastern spirituality and Western science. He wanted India to harness the strength of its Vedantic heritage to master modern scientific knowledge. For him, education was not just about personal development but also about serving the poor—*Daridra Narayana*. Any education that does not instil compassion and a spirit of sacrifice is meaningless (Vivekananda, 1947).

Sri Aurobindo Ghose elevated the philosophy of education to a higher psychological and evolutionary level. According to him, education is not merely the accumulation of information but a transformation of consciousness. His concept of *Integral Education* emphasizes the development of five aspects of a learner: physical, vital, mental, psychic, and spiritual (Aurobindo, 1956). Aurobindo opposed the authoritarian role of traditional teachers. He famously stated, "The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught" (Aurobindo, 1924). The teacher, in his view, should act as a guide who helps awaken the latent potential within the student. He emphasized that Indian education must connect with the nation's inner soul (*Atman*) and break free from the "foreign mold" imposed by colonial rule, allowing the independent evolution of Indian intellect.

Although these four thinkers had distinct perspectives, there was a deep unity among them regarding decolonization and Swadeshi ideals:

- a. **Opposition to Colonialism:** All agreed that Macaulay's education system was turning Indians into intellectual subordinates.

- b. **Primacy of Mother Tongue:** Each emphasized the importance of the mother tongue as the medium of education.
- c. **Holistic Development:** They all advocated for the overall development of the learner—not just intellectual, but also physical, emotional, and moral.

However, differences are also evident. Gandhi emphasized labour and economic self-reliance, while Tagore focused on aesthetics and harmony with nature. Vivekananda and Aurobindo, on the other hand, stressed spiritual awakening and inner evolution.

The educational philosophies of these thinkers were not merely critiques of colonial rule; they served as a blueprint for an independent and self-reliant India. The essence of their Swadeshi education philosophy lies in harmonizing cultural rootedness with openness to modern knowledge and science. Any contemporary discussion on educational reform in India remains incomplete without this philosophical foundation. Even today, concepts like “holistic education” and “skill development” echo the ideas of these great thinkers (Kumar, 2005).

4. De-colonization of Education in Contemporary India and NEP 2020:

Although several education commissions (such as the Radhakrishnan Commission and the Kothari Commission) were established after India gained independence, the fundamental structure of education largely remained rooted in the colonial framework introduced by Macaulay. However, the *National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)* is being recognized as a landmark turning point in the history of Indian education, as its central objective is the “decolonization of education.” This policy represents a state-led effort to revive the “Swadeshi education” ideals of Indian thinkers within a modern global context (Ministry of Education, 2020).

One of the primary tools of colonial education was the English language, which created a divide between education and the masses. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore emphasized education in the mother tongue. NEP 2020 clearly states that the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue or regional language at least until Grade 5 (preferably up to Grade 8) (NEP 2020, Section 4.11). This approach helps preserve the originality of students’ thinking and marks the first step toward freeing them from Macaulay’s “mental subjugation.” It also reflects Gandhi’s belief that education through the mother tongue directly reaches the child’s heart (Gandhi, 1938).

A key aspect of decolonization is restoring respect for one’s own history and intellectual traditions. Colonial education marginalized Indian contributions to mathematics, science, and philosophy. NEP 2020 emphasizes integrating the contributions of ancient Indian scholars—such as Charaka, Sushruta, Aryabhata, and Bhaskaracharya—into mainstream scientific education. This initiative can help eliminate inferiority complexes and foster a sense of national pride. Swami Vivekananda had envisioned an education system that harmonizes Indian tradition with modern science, and this vision is reflected in the current policy.

The British education system aimed to produce clerks rather than skilled professionals, leading to a social bias against manual labour. NEP 2020 addresses this by introducing vocational education from Grade 6 onward, making it a compulsory component. Students will gain hands-on experience by learning directly from local artisans (NEP 2020, Section 16.1). This is essentially a modern adaptation of Mahatma Gandhi’s *Nai Talim* or craft-based education, which seeks to make learners self-reliant in practical life (Gandhi, 1937).

Macaulay’s system was heavily exam-oriented, valuing rote memorization over creativity. In contrast, the new education policy emphasizes conceptual understanding rather than rote learning. The evaluation system now goes beyond marks to include social and emotional skills (*soft skills*). This aligns with Sri Aurobindo’s concept of *Integral Education*, which focuses on the development of the mind, life force, and spirit (Aurobindo, 1956).

The close teacher-student relationship emphasized in Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan model is also being revived in modern decolonization efforts. Students are now allowed to break away from rigid academic streams (science, arts, commerce) and choose interdisciplinary subjects (for example, combining mathematics with music). This reflects Tagore's idea of "free thinking," where education is liberated from artificial barriers (Tagore, 1917).

Decolonization does not mean isolation from the world. Rather, NEP 2020 aims to create "global citizens" who remain rooted in their own culture. This vision resonates with Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of combining Eastern spirituality with Western scientific outlook (Vivekananda, 1907). India aspires to establish itself as a global "knowledge superpower," echoing the vision of a self-reliant nation envisioned by its great thinkers.

In conclusion, contemporary India's education system has taken a significant step toward breaking free from the colonial framework introduced by Macaulay. While challenges remain in terms of implementation and infrastructure, the policy direction clearly reflects the adoption of the "Swadeshi" and humanistic ideals proposed by Indian thinkers. This process of decolonization will not only make India's education system more rooted in its own culture but may also present a balanced, life-oriented model at the global level.

5. Challenges and Possibilities: A Critical Analysis:

The re-establishment of the "Swadeshi education" philosophy proposed by Indian thinkers and the process of decolonization through the *National Education Policy 2020* are theoretically robust. However, their implementation faces multiple challenges in practice:

a) Structural and Linguistic Challenges:

A central pillar of decolonization is education in the mother tongue. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore strongly advocated this (Gandhi, 1938; Tagore, 1917). However, in contemporary India, its implementation is complex. In the 21st century, English is no longer merely a colonial language; it has become the global *lingua franca* of science, technology, and commerce. Therefore, replacing English with regional languages in higher education may place students at a disadvantage in global competition, according to many scholars (Basu, 1982). Translating complex terminologies of advanced disciplines such as science, medicine, and engineering into regional languages is a massive undertaking. The lack of high-quality textbooks and reference materials further complicates the path toward mother-tongue-based education.

b) Psychological and Social Barriers:

The deepest impact of colonial education lies in the psychological framework of Indian society. The "clerk-producing" mindset introduced by Macaulay has not yet been fully eradicated. Even today, for many Indian parents and students, the primary goal of education is securing a stable government or corporate job. Gandhi's *Nai Talim* and modern vocational education demand dignity for manual labour, but Indian society is still not mentally prepared to fully embrace this idea (Kumar, 2005). The colonial legacy of devaluing physical labour remains a major obstacle to decolonization. The ideals of "man-making education" and "holistic development" advocated by Vivekananda and Aurobindo continue to be overshadowed by a marks-centric evaluation system. The culture of coaching centers and the pressure of competitive exams often stifle creativity at its roots.

c) Technological and Digital Divide:

NEP 2020 places strong emphasis on digital education. However, in a diverse country like India, this digital transformation may create new inequalities. While urban areas enjoy advanced technology and high-speed

internet, rural regions still face severe infrastructural deficiencies. The vision of mass education advocated by Indian thinkers could be undermined by unequal access to technology (Ministry of Education, 2020). Moreover, the majority of online knowledge resources are Western-centric and in English. Thus, creating indigenous digital content becomes a significant challenge in the process of digital decolonization.

d) Economic Investment and Infrastructure:

To realize the ideals of decolonized education, schools must provide environments close to nature along with modern vocational training facilities. From the Kothari Commission to NEP 2020, all have recommended allocating 6% of GDP to education. However, in practice, India has yet to achieve this target. Without adequate laboratories, playgrounds, and trained teachers, the vision of “Swadeshi education” risks remaining confined to policy documents. Despite these challenges, the decolonization of India’s education system also presents remarkable opportunities. India’s ancient knowledge systems—such as Ayurveda, Yoga, mathematics, and environmentally sustainable lifestyles—are increasingly recognized worldwide. If integrated effectively with modern science, India has the potential to emerge as a global “knowledge superpower,” fulfilling Swami Vivekananda’s vision (Vivekananda, 1907). The expansion of vocational education can revive India’s small-scale and cottage industries. This would not only reduce unemployment but also give a modern form to Gandhi’s idea of *self-reliant villages* (*Gram Swaraj*). Decolonization is also fostering a sense of pride among Indian students in their own history and heritage. This growing “national self-confidence” is essential for the overall development of any nation. Decolonization does not imply rejecting modern science or Western philosophy. Rabindranath Tagore himself advocated a synthesis of Eastern and Western knowledge. The real challenge lies in preserving India’s cultural essence while engaging with global ideas. Today’s challenges are primarily practical rather than philosophical. Without the collective participation of policymakers, educators, and society at large, the process of decolonization cannot succeed. It is important to remember that decolonization is not a destination but a continuous process—one that gradually frees us from colonial influences and guides us toward original and independent thinking.

6. Conclusion:

From the comparative discussion of the educational philosophies of Indian thinkers and the ongoing process of decolonization in contemporary India’s education system, it becomes clear that the present transformation is not a sudden development. Rather, it is the outcome of a continuous intellectual struggle spanning over one and a half centuries to break free from colonial domination. The system introduced by Lord Macaulay aimed to mentally subjugate Indians. However, thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo envisioned a luminous alternative even during that dark period.

This discussion has shown that their educational philosophies were founded on three key pillars: individuality, creativity, and holism. While Gandhi emphasized economic and social self-reliance (*Swaraj*) through education, Tagore sought cultural and aesthetic liberation. Vivekananda and Aurobindo stressed the awakening of the inner self and spiritual evolution. The true essence of “decolonization” lies not merely in changing colonial curricula, but in eradicating the inferiority complex from the minds of Indian learners and restoring their self-respect.

An analysis of the *National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)* reveals that these visions of Indian thinkers have now taken the form of official policy. The effort to dismantle Macaulay’s mechanical, clerk-producing system and replace it with a skill-based education model is essentially a modern adaptation of Gandhi’s *Nai Talim*. Similarly, the commitment to mother-tongue-based education honors Tagore’s deep conviction, where he likened the mother tongue to “mother’s milk.” However, it is undeniable that policy formulation alone does not complete the process of decolonization. The wide gap between theory and practice has been highlighted throughout this discussion. In the age of globalization, the continued importance of English and the digital divide between urban and rural India may slow down this process. Moreover, the colonial mindset

that values academic degrees over manual labor remains deeply embedded in Indian society, making change a long-term social challenge. Yet, these limitations do not diminish the importance of decolonization; rather, they emphasize the need for greater investment, infrastructural development, and teacher training. As Sri Aurobindo suggested, education is not a static repository of information but a living force—one that must be rooted in the soil and spirit of India.

The ultimate goal of decolonization is to transform India into a global “knowledge superpower.” The vision of Swami Vivekananda—of an India that harmonizes Western science with Eastern spirituality—is reflected in current educational reforms. Indian Knowledge Systems are no longer confined to history; they have the potential to address contemporary global challenges such as climate change, mental health, and sustainable development. This transformation represents a true *paradigm shift*—from an era of producing clerks to an era of “man-making education.” In this journey, Tagore’s universalism can safeguard against narrow nationalism, while Gandhi’s emphasis on self-reliance can strengthen the nation’s economic foundation.

In conclusion, decolonization is not a destination but an ongoing journey. It is not about revisiting the past, but about preparing for the future. Rejecting Macaulay’s legacy does not mean discarding Western knowledge; rather, it means acquiring the ability to interpret and adapt it within the Indian context. The alignment between the “Swadeshi education” ideals of Indian thinkers and present-day policies demonstrate the timeless relevance of their vision. As India moves toward the centenary of its independence, a decolonized education system can become its greatest asset. If these reforms are successfully implemented, Indian students will not merely be job seekers but job creators and innovators. Only then will the long-cherished dream of these thinkers be realized—where education becomes a path to liberation, where “the mind is without fear and the head is held high.” This educational renaissance in India is not just the liberation of a nation, but a reassertion of its unique contribution to global civilization.

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