

Unmasking Colonial Legacies: Decolonizing Text Books in Kerala

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This paper argues that decolonizing education is essential to dismantle the lasting effects of colonialism on our thinking and learning. It involves critically examining curricula, acknowledging past biases, and promoting indigenous perspectives. While some efforts have been made, many textbooks still lack local representation and perpetuate colonial narratives. The paper highlights the importance of decolonizing textbooks by including local authors and diverse perspectives, fostering cultural identity, and creating a more inclusive learning experience.

Key Words: Decolonization, Education, Curriculum, Textbooks, Colonial Influences, Postcolonial Society, Cultural Diversity, Inclusivity, Identity, Indigenous Knowledge.

Introduction

Decolonization is a process that can help dismantle the lasting impact of colonialism on how we think and learn. It involves challenging Western-centric systems within education: the institutions, methods, symbols, and ideas that hold Western perspectives as superior. While many countries have gained political independence, the legacy of colonialism still lingers. True decolonization means deliberately working towards a future where the influence of colonial power – whether obvious or hidden, physical or mental – no longer exists. This includes how nations gained their freedom and continue to fight against the

ongoing effects of colonial oppression. Elder argues, “Decolonization of education characteristically includes rewriting the curriculum and syllabi, if only to bring about the minimum of changing the ‘law-breaking insurgents’ to the ‘nation’s heroes’ in the struggle for independence.” (Elder,284) A decolonized way of thinking and acting is fundamentally different from the colonial mindset. It means understanding the world from the perspective of indigenous peoples and recognizing how colonization has impacted them. Decolonization involves restoring an indigenous way of understanding the world, which necessarily challenges the colonial mentality. In education, decolonization means not only examining the harmful effects of colonialism but also actively working to dismantle colonized ways of thinking for both the colonizers and the colonized.

Alcoff argues “Decolonizing education requires first and foremost a thorough and comprehensive critical analysis of colonialism itself, in all its subtle guises.” (Alcoff, 12) Decolonization isn’t simply about reversing the roles of colonizer and colonized. It’s about giving voice and power to those who have been silenced and ignored. To achieve this, decolonization draws on diverse ways of understanding the world, fundamentally shifting how we view power, change, and what counts as knowledge. True decolonization means challenging the existing systems that harm indigenous communities; this often leads to conflict, but it’s a necessary part of the process.

This paper examines four different aspects. Analyzing the decolonization of textbooks and curricula is the first part. The second part of the discussion focuses on the issues with Kerala’s colonial textbooks. Examining the colonial traces and legacies in Kerala’s postcolonial textbooks is the third component. The final section explains the efforts made to identify and eradicate colonial remnants from post-colonial textbooks and to rewrite them in a way that is consistent with native identity and culture.

Decolonizing the curriculum involves recovering and reviving hidden, ignored, or marginalized ways of knowing and teaching. After gaining independence, former colonies invested heavily in decolonizing their citizens’ minds, bodies, and spirits, fostering national pride.

Decolonizing textbooks is crucial in post-colonial societies. Educators need to recognize that textbooks often reflect the dominant group's perspective. Therefore, decolonizing these texts involves ensuring marginalized voices are heard, validated, and valued. This fosters diverse perspectives about the past, present, and future, benefiting students and society as a whole. Colonial powers use education as a tool to control their colonies. They force their own educational systems on the colonized people, aiming to wipe out local culture and force them to adopt the colonizers' ways. This process is called assimilation.

Textbooks become weapons in this process. They often promote a false sense of superiority for the colonizers, painting them as advanced and civilized, while portraying the colonized cultures as backwards and in need of saving. History is rewritten to glorify the colonizers and hide the violence and exploitation of their rule. Literature from the colonizing country is pushed, while local works are ignored. All of this serves to make the colonized people believe they are inferior and that the colonial power was beneficial to them.

Malayalam Randam Padapusthakam, a textbook for second grade in the schools was published in 1922 by the Travancore State Government. The text book contains different lessons on features of animals to acquaint the children like the cow, crow, dog, elephant, goat, hen, bull, horse, jackal, sheep, and tiger are among those in the textbook. The children became more knowledgeable about the animals that live nearby. Besides these the text book also includes the life experience and stories based on western culture such as *Balanaya Washington (The Childhood of Washington)* (*Malayalam Randam Padapusthakam*, 54) and *Budhiyulla Balan (The Intelligent Child)*, (*Malayalam Randam Padapusthakam*, 65) to instil the western morals in the students. Another textbook namely *Second Reader (Randam Padapusthakam)*, which was taught in schools in Travancore for second standard in 1926 also contains the stories related to western cultures. Even though these were published by Travancore government the textbooks transmit the western practices and cultures.

The text book for fifth grade namely *The History of Malabar Part II* (Aiyer) which was taught in schools in Malabar in 1922 justified the colonial rule and distorted the historical events in Kerala. The third part of the text book *Engleeshukarude Bharanam (British Rule)* justifies the revenue taxation of British in Kerala and criticised Pazhassi Raja. There are two chapters on Pazhassi Raja and these chapters depicted that Pazhassi Raja created anarchy and chaos in Kottayam. (Aiyer , 117-125). The text also told that Pazhassi Raja showed cruel attitude towards the people and so that the people never supported him at any time. The text book justified the suppression of the Pazhassi revolt.

The text also mentioned about the Kurichia Revolt of 1812, and it is referred in a derogatory way as *Gothra Kalapam*. It explained how the new taxation system that the British had instituted among the tribes had been misunderstood by them. Additionally, it implies that the indigenous people were favoured by British policies. (Aiyer, 131-135) In essence, the book presents colonial policies as beneficial to the indigenous population while distorting anti-British agitations and movements. The textbooks depicted this kind of historical interpretations on Kerala and its leaders.

The text book for English learning for different classes in colonial period also depicted the colonial ideology and colonial life. The text book *Fourth Reader* for the primary classes in 1908 was the best example for this. The first chapter *A Narrow Escape* told about the story related to three Europeans who are trying to flee from France to escape persecution for their religion. (The Fourth Reader, 1-7) Another chapter *The Siege of Lucknow Part I and Part II* is explaining the 1857 revolt and termed the Indians as rebels. The chapter explained the miseries of Englishmen in the revolt and never mentioned the real reason of the great revolt. They misinterpreted the revolt of 1857 in the colonial perspective. (The Fourth Reader 73-77)

This colonial-era textbook reveals how the colonizers justified their rule and influenced the education system. This biased perspective has had a lasting impact, even after independence. Efforts are now underway to decolonize the curriculum by presenting accurate history,

diverse viewpoints, and respect for indigenous culture. This will give students a more complete and unbiased understanding of Kerala's past, replacing the distorted narratives created during the colonial period.

Colonial education left a deep mark, influencing the way people thought even after independence. Textbooks in Kerala continued to show these influences in several ways: The history text books may have focused more on Western history, undervaluing the rich history and achievements of Kerala. The English books may have mostly included Western literature, overlooking local and indigenous works that could have provided a deeper understanding of Kerala's culture and heritage.

The text books of our school children during 1960s and 1970s read the stories of Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Aesop's Fables. Britain's Greco-Roman heritage lingers in the accounts of the Trojan Horse, Romulus and Remus, the Marathon Race etc. When we learned the legends of Solomon and Santa Claus the Britain's Judeo-Christian heritage is apparent. In the higher education, Indian students are exposed to Jim Corbett's account of a tiger hunt, the candlestick scene from *Les Miserables*, and an abridged version of *The Merchant of Venice*. Bhagaban Prasad Majumdar wrote about the colonial syllabus through his book *First Fruits of English Education 1817-1857*

An acquaintance with the histories of Rome and Greece, through Goldsmith, and the histories published by the society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and with the help of Niebuhr.; the history of modern Europe, through Russell; the history of India, through Symonds, Norton and Marshman; and the philosophy of history, through Smyth's lectures.. In natural philosophy, Plane astronomy, through Herschell, optics from the work of the society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, and from notes and formulates of the head master, Mr. Powell, Mechanics, Hydrostatics and Pneumatics from the same materials. Chemistry from Mrs. Marcet's work. The elements of political economy from Mrs. Marcet's work. Mental philosophy from Abercrombies

work. In Mathematics Plane and Spherical Trigonometry, the first three sections of Newton's Principia, as modelled by the Head Master, and the Ellipse in Conic Sections. Reading in Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and extracts from various authors, published in Chamber's Encyclopaedia of Literature and the Calcutta Reader; besides English composition. (Majumdar, 182-1823)

The text book for sixth form *India Charithram* (Indian History) in 1952 which was published by Tiru-Kochi Government contains three parts. The first part explained the reforms and activities of Governor Generals and Viceroys in India. Most of the descriptions in the text book are in favour of the British administration. For instance, the chapter II *Purogamanomughamaya Parishkaranangal* (*Progressive Reforms of British in India*) explained that the British brought several reforms in the field of education, taxation, economy and administration. The book glorified the activities of Governor Generals and Viceroys. (Kunjuraman, 8-14)

The text book *Samoohya Paddangal* (Social Science) for IXth standard in 1960 contains fourteen chapters. The first chapter namely Barbarians of South India consists the different tribes in South India like *Kadar, Thodar, Kurumbar* etc. The text book termed them as barbarians. (Samoohya Paddangal, 7-14) The content of the other chapter is the description of different geographical features of countries like Malaya, Australia, America, China, Germany etc. The other chapters of the text book are the democracy in England, the revolution of America and France, the Greek Culture etc. The only one chapter discusses the Indian national movement.

The best illustration of how colonial legacies have been displaced in the postcolonial psyche is found in the 1971 textbook *Social Studies Standard VII*. Ancient India, Muslim India, and British India are the three chapters that make up the first section of the text book. (Social Studies Standard VII, 3) It is evident that our text book also follows James Mill's periodization of Indian history. James Mill split Indian history along colonial lines, and our educators adopted these viewpoints as well.

The text book of English in standard IX, *Kerala Reader* in 1979 consists of 19 lessons including prose and poems. The some of the lessons in the text book namely *King and Fisherman* (*Kerala Reader, Std. IX, 21*) the story of Umayyad ruler Mansoor, Russian story *The Signal* (*Kerala Reader, Std. IX, 45*), *Discovery of Pencillin*, (*Kerala Reader, Std. IX, 80*) *Aboo Hassan and his Wife* (*Kerala Reader, Std. IX, 89*) a story of Aboo Hassan who lived during the period of Harun Al Rashid, king of Bagdad, *Mysterious Picture*(*Kerala Reader, Std. IX, 117*) the story of Charles de Costa who is known as the father of Belgian literature and *Monday Morning* (*Kerala Reader, Std. IX, 167*) by Mark Twain. Most of the stories in the text book represent the western culture and stories. Even after the three decades of independence the colonial and western culture still existed in our curriculum and syllabus.

Decolonizing education is essential, especially in Kerala where colonial influence was significant. Though some effort has been made to revise the curriculum since independence, it still lacks representation of local heroes and historical narratives. Local figures like scholars, religious leaders, and literary icons are missing from the curriculum. Western figures are over represented compared to Indian ones, particularly in science, exploration, and literature. The curriculum doesn't adequately cover Indian contributions to various fields and important global events. This highlights the ongoing need to decolonize the curriculum in Kerala and ensure a more inclusive and balanced representation of local and global narratives

Decolonization of textbooks involves changing educational materials to reflect the perspectives, histories, and interests of the native or local communities. Decolonizing textbooks ensures that the content is culturally relevant to the students. By incorporating the histories, traditions, and experiences of the native community, textbooks become more relatable and meaningful, enhancing the overall learning experience. Many traditional textbooks have perpetuated historical injustices by either ignoring or downplaying the impact of colonization. Decolonization involves acknowledging and addressing these injustices, providing a more honest and balanced portrayal of historical events. The inclusion of native writers and their articles as a part of decolonizing

textbooks is a crucial and positive step towards creating a more inclusive and diverse educational experience. Including writings from native authors ensures that the voices, perspectives, and experiences of indigenous or local communities are represented in the educational curriculum. This representation is essential for fostering a sense of identity, pride, and connection to one's own cultural heritage. Native writers often draw on local histories, traditions, and folklore in their works. Incorporating these elements into textbooks helps students connect with their own history and understand the socio-cultural context in which they live. Including the works of native writers empowers the next generation to take pride in their cultural heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and agency. It encourages students to see themselves as active contributors to the on-going narrative of their culture and society.

Pazhassi Raja: The Lion of Kerala (Kerala Reader 180-192) and *Gandhiji and Children* (Kerala Reader, 204-209) were the two chapters found in the English textbook *Kerala Reader* for the ninth grade in 1979. The textbook provided a clear explanation of Gandhi's character toward the children as well as the struggles faced by Pazhassi Raja. The children's sense of nationalism and patriotism is sparked by these two chapters. Students are able to comprehend Kerala's anti-colonial struggles.

The Social Studies, Standard VII, the textbook in 1971 represented a commendable effort at decolonization. It is evident as we read through the chapters that they are all about our country. The first section named as *A Peep into the History of Our Nation*. The remaining chapters cover *India's religions, Planning, Industrial Development, Agricultural Development, Toward freedom and History of Post Independent India*.

Kerala Paddavali, Standard VI the textbook in 1974 was a fantastic attempt to break free from colonialism's grasp. Every lesson has a connection to our own customs and heritage. The stories of Mahabharatha are covered in chapters like *Kurukshetrathinte Karinizhal* (Under the Shadow of Kurukshetra) (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard VI, 14-18) and *Dharmmathinte Sandesham* (Message of

Dharma) (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard VI , 19-25) . The fight against the Portuguese by Kunjali Marakkar was explained in the chapter *Arabikkadalile Kollimeen* (Falling Star of Arabian Sea) (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard VI , 26). The exile of Bahadoorsha Safar, the last Mughal emperor, and his wife Zeenath Mahal is the subject of the lesson *Mathrubhoomiyodu Vidavangunnu* (A Farewell to Mother Land) (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard VI , 107). The text also includes a number of poems authored by well-known poets from Kerala. Some examples of this are the poems *Mrigaraja Kudumbam* (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard VI , 71) by Kumaranasan and *Thirinjuntottam* (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard VI , 85) by Akkitham.

Another textbook that demonstrates the decolonization of text books is *Kerala Paddavali, Standard IV*, published in 1981. It is composed of multiple poems, all of which were penned by well-known poets from Kerala. Some examples of this are: Kumaranasan's *Chithiramasam* (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard IV, 1) Vllathol Nrayana Menon's *Swanthathryam thanne Jeevitham* (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard IV, 59) Thunchath Ezhittachan's *Kattu Theyi Petta Kudumbam* (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard IV. 24-26) Poonthanam's *Panathinu Pinnale* (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard IV, 26) Kunchan Nambiar's *Kalanillatha Kalam* (*Kerala Paddavali*, Standard IV. 50-51)

Including diverse perspectives in education prepares students to thrive in a globalized world while valuing their own heritage. This requires carefully examining existing materials and intentionally creating content that celebrates the many cultures within a post-colonial society. This approach leads to a more inclusive, fair, and culturally aware educational experience.

Conclusion

Decolonizing education is a complex and continuous process. It involves changing the curriculum, recognizing past biases, and highlighting indigenous voices. This is necessary because colonial influence still lingers in many educational materials. Including the works of native writers is a crucial part of decolonization, as it promotes diversity, helps students connect with their roots, and creates a fairer

learning environment. The goal isn't just to change textbooks; it's to empower students with a strong sense of identity, pride, and the ability to think critically. This ensures a future where the negative effects of colonialism are truly gone.

Endnotes

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