

DECOLONIZATION OF THE HISTORY CURRICULUM IN INDIAN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF IMPLEMENTATION AT A HIGH SCHOOL IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the practical implementation of a decolonized history curriculum in an Indian senior secondary school, with a case study conducted at Kendriya Vidyalaya in Chennai. While national education policies in India increasingly promote inclusive and postcolonial approaches to history teaching, there is limited empirical research on how these reforms are enacted in real classroom settings. Using a qualitative case study method, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of curricular documents. The findings reveal a significant gap between policy discourse and pedagogical practice. Teachers express theoretical support for decolonizing the curriculum but face challenges such as rigid syllabi, exam-oriented instruction, and lack of professional development. Classroom practices largely remain textbook-centered, with minimal use of local histories, critical thinking tasks, or student-led inquiry. The study offers a novel contribution by linking national-level curriculum reforms with micro-level school dynamics, and by incorporating multiple data sources to highlight the nuanced realities of implementation. It also foregrounds the importance of teacher agency and contextual adaptation in achieving epistemic justice in postcolonial education. In conclusion, while efforts toward decolonization exist in rhetoric and curriculum content, their transformative potential remains underutilized without systemic support for pedagogical change. The research underscores the need for training, flexibility, and curricular autonomy to actualize meaningful historical education in India..

Keywords: Decolonization, history education, Indian curriculum, critical pedagogy, postcolonial studies

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of history has long been intertwined with the politics of knowledge production and cultural identity. In postcolonial contexts like India, the school history curriculum continues to reflect significant traces of colonial epistemologies that prioritize Eurocentric narratives and marginalize indigenous perspectives. Colonial history education was instrumental in shaping a narrative that portrayed the British as civilizers, while downplaying or misrepresenting the contributions of local cultures and resistance movements (Vinciguerra et al., 2019). As a result, the historical consciousness developed among students often lacks critical engagement with India's diverse past and complex socio-political heritage. Theoretical frameworks in postcolonial education stress the importance of revisiting such narratives to restore epistemic justice (Gillate et al., 2023; Idacavage & McAndrews, 2024).

Decolonization of the history curriculum entails more than revising textbooks; it involves a pedagogical shift towards recognizing multiple historical truths, local voices, and marginalized experiences. Scholars argue that curriculum decolonization is essential for constructing national identity that is inclusive, reflective, and historically grounded (Domenici, 2023; Jauhiainen & Guerra, 2023). In the Indian context, this means moving beyond the legacy of colonial and nationalist grand narratives to include regional histories, oral traditions, and subaltern perspectives. Schools thus become a crucial space where historical narratives can either reproduce or challenge hegemonic structures of power. However, translating decolonial theory into classroom practice requires not only curricular reform, but also teacher training, policy support, and pedagogical innovation (Brohinsky, 2023; Darsono et al., 2024).

Despite India's increasing attention to curriculum reform, the process of decolonizing history education remains inconsistent and often symbolic rather than transformative. In high schools such as those in Chennai, revised textbooks may include additional indigenous content, yet they often retain the structural and thematic frameworks inherited from colonial historiography (Fahrudin & Saefuddin, 2025; Zulkarnain et al., 2025). Teachers frequently rely on rote-learning methods and standardized assessments, limiting students' opportunities to critically engage with alternative historical narratives. The curriculum still emphasizes major political events and elite figures, while overlooking subaltern histories, local traditions, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. This reflects a deeper issue: the lack of a cohesive pedagogical strategy that translates decolonial theory into actionable classroom practice (Efiloglu Kurt, 2023).

Moreover, the politicization of history education in India further complicates genuine curricular reform. Successive governments have attempted to reinterpret historical narratives based on prevailing ideological interests, sometimes replacing colonial biases with religious or nationalist ones (Kurniasih et al., 2018). In schools across Chennai, teachers report feeling constrained by state-prescribed syllabi, a shortage of contextually relevant teaching resources, and limited autonomy to innovate or diversify historical content. These challenges contribute to a superficial understanding of decolonization that fails to address deeper power dynamics in knowledge production. As a result, many students graduate without the tools to interrogate history critically or to appreciate the pluralistic fabric of India's past (Lin & Shen, 2024).

While existing literature provides critical insights into the colonial legacy of history education in India, there remains a paucity of empirical research that focuses on the practical implementation of decolonized curricula at the secondary school level—particularly in urban settings like Chennai. Most studies emphasize theoretical frameworks or national-level policy analysis without examining how these reforms materialize in everyday classroom interactions (Sousa et al., 2022; Temerbayeva et al., 2023). Additionally, teacher perspectives and student experiences are often underrepresented in the discourse, despite their central role in shaping the effectiveness of curricular transformation. Few studies have explored the tensions between textbook

reforms and pedagogical practice, or the institutional constraints that hinder the decolonization process. This gap highlights the need for localized, school-based research that captures the realities of curriculum implementation within specific sociopolitical contexts (Zulkarnain et al., 2025).

This study offers a novel contribution by providing a localized, empirical analysis of how the decolonization of the history curriculum is implemented at a senior secondary school in Chennai—an area that has received limited scholarly attention. By integrating classroom observations, teacher interviews, and curriculum analysis, this research bridges the gap between national-level policy rhetoric and ground-level educational practice. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on textbook content or ideological shifts, this study highlights the nuanced challenges faced by educators in translating decolonial aims into actionable pedagogy. It also examines how institutional culture, assessment systems, and sociopolitical influences intersect in shaping the outcomes of curriculum reform. In doing so, the study advances the discourse on decolonized education by grounding it in practical, context-specific realities.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how the decolonization of the history curriculum is implemented in a senior secondary school in Chennai, with a specific focus on pedagogical practices, institutional constraints, and educator interpretations. This research aims to analyze how teachers navigate textbook content, teaching methods, and assessment strategies in the context of decolonial education. It also seeks to explore students' engagement with alternative historical narratives and their understanding of India's pluralistic past. By investigating these aspects, the study intends to uncover the disjunction between curricular reforms at the policy level and their realization in classroom settings. Furthermore, it aims to highlight the sociocultural and political factors that shape curriculum delivery. Ultimately, the study aspires to provide practical recommendations for making history education in India more inclusive, critical, and responsive to postcolonial realities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the implementation of the decolonized history curriculum at Kendriya Vidyalaya Senior Secondary School in Chennai, a public school under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Data were collected using three main techniques: classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The observations focused on history lessons across two grade levels (Grades 11 and 12) to understand pedagogical practices and student engagement. A total of 12 participants were involved in the study, including 4 history teachers, 1 curriculum coordinator, and 7 students selected through purposive sampling. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured guides to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences. In addition, school documents such as lesson plans, textbooks, and assessment materials were analyzed to support triangulation of data. This method allowed for a rich and context-specific understanding of how decolonial principles are enacted in everyday teaching (Aman & Singh, 2022).

The data collection in this study utilized three primary instruments tailored to the qualitative case study design. Observation checklists were used to document classroom dynamics, teacher-student interactions, and instructional methods during history lessons. Semi-structured interview guides were developed to explore participants' perceptions and experiences, allowing for flexibility while maintaining consistency across interviews. These guides included open-ended questions focused on curriculum interpretation, pedagogical strategies, and perceived challenges in implementing decolonial content. In addition, document analysis sheets were employed to systematically examine textbooks, lesson plans, and evaluation tools. All instruments were designed to align with the research objectives and ensure depth and clarity in the data collected. To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by two educational experts before field deployment.

The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which allowed for the identification of patterns, themes, and underlying meanings within the qualitative data. Transcripts from interviews and field notes were first coded inductively, allowing categories to emerge organically from the data. These initial codes were then grouped into broader themes related to curriculum interpretation, pedagogical practices, institutional constraints, and student engagement. NVivo 12 software was utilized to assist in the organization and management of qualitative data, ensuring transparency and traceability of the coding process. Document analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques to identify colonial or decolonial tendencies in curricular materials. Triangulation across different data sources enhanced the reliability of the findings. The final interpretation was guided by postcolonial education theory and curriculum studies frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first major finding reveals that while the curriculum at Kendriya Vidyalaya Senior Secondary School in Chennai has incorporated elements intended to reflect a decolonized approach, classroom implementation remains largely conventional. Teachers continue to rely heavily on textbooks and lecture-based instruction, with limited emphasis on participatory or critical engagement strategies. This is evident in classroom observations, where discussions of colonialism or indigenous perspectives were often superficial or quickly redirected to textbook content. Table 1 presents the observed teaching practices and their alignment with decolonial pedagogical indicators. These findings suggest a disconnect between curriculum reform intentions and actual pedagogical practice at the ground level.

The second key finding concerns the teachers' understanding and interpretation of the decolonized history curriculum. Interviews reveal that most teachers support the idea of integrating local histories and marginalized voices, but express uncertainty about how to do so effectively within the constraints of the CBSE syllabus and time-limited academic calendar. They also cite the pressure of board examinations, which prioritize factual recall over critical analysis. As shown in Table 1, most teachers ranked low in their use of decolonial teaching methods, such as incorporating oral histories or

questioning colonial narratives. This indicates a need for targeted professional development to equip teachers with the skills and confidence to implement decolonial pedagogy.

The third major finding relates to student engagement with historical content. While a few students expressed interest in alternative narratives and regional histories, most displayed a surface-level understanding of key historical concepts. Interviews revealed that students primarily study history to pass exams rather than to explore its societal relevance or moral implications. Table 1 also shows a low frequency of classroom activities that foster critical thinking, such as debates or source analysis. These findings align with previous research (Godsell et al., 2024) that points to a system focused on performance metrics rather than transformative education. A shift in both assessment design and teaching strategies is needed to foster deeper engagement with decolonial content.

Table 1: Table 1. Summary of Key Findings and Alignment with Decolonial Indicators

Category	Observed Practice	Alignment with Decolonial Principles
Teaching Methods	Lecture, textbook-centered	Low
Use of Local/Oral Histories	Rarely included	Minimal
Critical Thinking Activities	Infrequent (debates, source analysis)	Low
Teacher Understanding	Supportive but unclear on methods	Moderate
Student Engagement	Focused on exams, passive learning	Low

The findings of this study align with recent scholarship emphasizing the limited translation of decolonial curriculum reform into classroom practice. Although educational policies may adopt the language of decolonization, the deep-rooted epistemological hierarchies within school systems often remain untouched. Similarly, teachers across CBSE-affiliated schools continue to prioritize exam preparation over critical engagement with diverse historical narratives. This study confirms that structural constraints—such as rigid syllabi, standardized assessments, and lack of teacher training—act as barriers to decolonial implementation (Borrero, 2023; Visuddho et al., 2023). Moreover, the marginal inclusion of regional histories or oral traditions tends to be symbolic, not transformative. These patterns reflect a broader global struggle to shift from inclusion to epistemic justice in postcolonial curriculum reform (Noel & Kondracka-Szala, 2024; Siemerku et al., 2023).

Beyond structural limitations, teacher capacity and interpretive agency are also critical in realizing a decolonized curriculum. Many educators support the idea of pluralistic history education, but are uncertain how to navigate between policy expectations, limited

resources, and community sensitivities (Noel & Kondracka-Szala, 2024; Siemerku et al., 2023). This study echoes their findings, as participants expressed theoretical alignment with decolonial goals but lacked practical tools to embed them in pedagogy. Effective teacher training must incorporate not only content knowledge but also critical pedagogy frameworks that challenge colonial logics in teaching (Miralles-Martínez et al., 2019). Furthermore, that teacher autonomy is essential for adapting curriculum to local contexts, especially in culturally diverse regions like Tamil Nadu. These insights reinforce the need for multi-level reform that supports teachers as both implementers and co-creators of decolonized knowledge (Tanikwele & Ibrahim, 2023).

This study offers a distinct contribution to the discourse on decolonizing history education by focusing on the practical implementation of curriculum reform at the school level, specifically within an Indian urban context. Unlike prior research that emphasizes either theoretical frameworks (Stone, 2022) or national textbook policy analysis (Patahuddin, 2018), this study situates itself in the lived experiences of both teachers and students. By investigating a specific high school in Chennai, it bridges the gap between macro-level policy intentions and micro-level pedagogical realities. Moreover, this research extends the discussion on epistemic justice by highlighting how decolonial goals are interpreted, adapted, or resisted by educators in everyday practice—a perspective often overlooked in South Asian educational studies (Lee & Chun, 2024).

In addition, this study integrates multi-layered data sources—including observations, interviews, and document analysis—to produce a more holistic and context-sensitive understanding of how history is taught in postcolonial India. Previous works have rarely combined these qualitative tools to explore the dynamic interplay between curriculum content, teacher agency, and student engagement (Walker, 2022). Furthermore, it foregrounds the institutional and cultural specificities of Tamil Nadu, offering insights into regional complexities that are often flattened in national education debates. By situating curriculum decolonization within a local school culture, the study challenges universalist models of reform and underscores the importance of context-based, participatory approaches to educational transformation (Chen & Yuan, 2022; Sader et al., 2022).

This study contributes meaningfully to the global discourse on curriculum decolonization by providing grounded insights from the Global South, specifically within the Indian secondary education context. As debates around decolonizing education gain momentum worldwide, particularly in formerly colonized nations and multicultural societies, localized case studies like this offer valuable empirical evidence for comparison and policy reflection (Efiloğlu Kurt, 2023). The findings underscore the universal challenges of translating decolonial ideals into classroom realities—challenges that resonate across diverse geopolitical settings, from Africa to Latin America and Southeast Asia (Godsell et al., 2024; Neuhaus & Vogt, 2022). By highlighting how institutional, cultural, and pedagogical dynamics intersect in shaping curriculum reform, this research encourages educators and policymakers globally to adopt more context-sensitive, participatory, and justice-oriented approaches. Thus, it not only enriches academic

literature but also informs global efforts to democratize historical knowledge in education systems.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that while efforts to decolonize the history curriculum at Kendriya Vidyalaya Senior Secondary School in Chennai are evident in revised content and official discourse, their practical implementation remains limited and inconsistent. Teachers demonstrate a theoretical understanding of decolonial aims but face significant barriers, including rigid syllabi, exam-oriented teaching, and lack of pedagogical support. Classroom practices still reflect traditional, textbook-driven methods with minimal incorporation of local or marginalized histories. Student engagement with critical historical thinking is also low, shaped by a performance-based education culture. These findings highlight a critical disconnect between curriculum reform and classroom realities. To realize the transformative goals of decolonial education, systemic changes are required—particularly in teacher training, assessment structures, and curriculum design that centers local knowledge and inclusive narratives.

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