

BOOK REVIEW

POLITICS OF EDUCATION IN COLONIAL INDIA

Kumar, K. (2014). *Politics of Education in Colonial India*. New Delhi, India: Routledge.

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The celebrated Indian sociologist and historian of education Krishna Kumar's analysis of education in colonial India, originally published in 1992 as *Political Agenda of Education*, has recently been updated and republished as *Politics of Education in Colonial India*. In this two-part book, Kumar presents what he views as the unique and seemingly contradictory "homonymity" of the colonial education system. On the one hand, British officers in the 19th century strove to utilize education as the method of enhancing the "morality" of the colonized population. This necessitated centralized control over the teachers and curriculum alike, creating the ideal of an impersonal system that would build a better native civil servant. On the other hand, the reality of public education, particularly for the higher castes and economic classes, led ultimately to the growth of a national consciousness. Religious and linguistic movements also flourished as a result of colonial education. These would come to shape anti-colonial and independence movements in the 20th century, as debates on the nature and future of education helped form an Indian national identity.

Part One of the book focuses on education as perceived by the British. Although highlighting that at every level the nature of the education Indian students would receive was fundamentally separated from their lived reality, the British introduced the role of education as

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“identity-forming ... creating the consciousness among the educated that they were a new elite” (p. 27). Chapter Two begins by looking at the ideology behind Indian education. Based on Enlightenment and liberal ideals such as “reason” and “good governance,” the British believed that they were in the position of the parent, teaching Indians to control their passions. Kumar argues that “... the guiding light of rationality, emanating from puritanical Christianity was essential to purge the passions which would otherwise lead to certain ruin, both material and spiritual” (p. 24).

Chapter Three then turns to the colonial curriculum. By purging what they considered to be “inappropriate”—such as the memorization and recitation of Persian poetry—the British disconnected Indian students from local oral and written knowledge, creating a system in which “whatever was worth learning was in the textbook” (p. 61). The goal of this curriculum was to prepare students for a standardized civil service exam, meaning that critical inquiry was discouraged. This directly impacted the role of the teacher, covered in Chapter Four, where instructors were increasingly only needed to impart the information covered in the standardized texts. Reliance upon (meager) public salaries, the resulting lack of community support, and the oversight of school inspectors created an Indian schoolteacher who was “someone with a book of rules in hand, cautiously protecting himself against any charge of deviation from the written code” (p. 85).

Part Two of the book then turns to Indian reformers in the early 20th century and explores how the perception of the colonial education system both shaped and informed their visions for a future India. Chapter Five looks at the issue of equality, where questions were raised about the accessibility of an education system that to this point had been almost the exclusive domain of the upper classes. For someone like Gandhi, for example, Kumar states that “education under colonial rule had become an instrument of India’s subjugation.” For Jyotirao Phule and later Ambedkar, however, “it had created a historic space for the oppressed castes to gain consciousness of their condition and its causes” (p. 112). Critical to this debate was the belief by some, such as Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, that education would “gradually spread” to underserved groups such as women and lower classes (p. 119).

The formation of Indian identity through the national education system is the subject of Chapter Six, which points out one of the greatest contradictions of the colonial educational project. While envisioning a “secular” education based primarily on English, it was this very system that promoted “two main sources of collective self-identity: religion (Hinduism) and language (Hindi)” (p. 131). Other movements such as

the Muslim-led Jamia Millia Islamia attempted to improve literacy and political participation for all. But they were, in Kumar's view, a "tragic effort" because they came too late in the development of education, with identity firmly established along elite religious and linguistic lines by the 1920s.

Chapter Seven closes Part Two by turning to the differing views of progress, personifying the discussion with the views of Gandhi and the poet Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore "was fascinated by the achievements of science, and by the variety of uses to which scientific discoveries had been put in Europe" (p. 180). He believed that Indian liberation, and nationalism, would come partially from the adoption of Western sciences. For Gandhi, on the other hand, "Western education, even in the emaciated form it had taken in India, was a negation of the principles of non-violence and truth, the two values he regarded as crucial" (p. 187). India must therefore return to its own "pristine condition" and "drive out Western civilization" (p. 189).

In his conclusion, Kumar emphasizes the complexity of India's experiment with colonial education. "While the institutions of learning had been almost completely destroyed by the British," he states, "the perceptions that it carried of knowledge, pedagogy, and expectations from both the teacher and the learner lived on" (p. 217). As a result, Kumar argues that "a general theory of colonial legacy is inaccurate because the experience that the system of education provides to India's children carries substantial elements derived from older or pre-colonial education" (p. 216).

Politics of Education in Colonial India has endured as an important corrective in the discourse not only on education but colonialism more generally, due primarily to the nuanced arguments provided by Kumar. By questioning more simplistic categorizations of British projects and tempering the theoretical issue of power dynamics, he asks his readers to focus on what was happening on the ground—by listening to those who both shaped and were impacted by the colonial project. Through this, a more complex picture of colonial India appears. To give one example, the image constructed by the British officers of education "secularizing" and "moralizing" Indians, turning them into cogs for the civil service to aid their economic exploitation of the country, runs counter to the scores of intellectual elites and the religious movements they founded that emerged from this very system.

The greatest weakness of Kumar's argument, however, lies in his push to see greater continuity between the pre-colonial and colonial education systems. At each turn, Kumar's description of the pre-colonial speaks not of the 18th, 17th, or even 16th century state of education, but

rather stretches all the way back to ancient India. When speaking about the nature of literacy and reading in Chapter Three, for example, Kumar gets around a lack of literacy statistics in Punjab in the early 19th century by citing a lecture of Romila Thapar to “confirm that literate and oral competencies were not necessarily held in differential esteem in ancient India” (p. 66, footnote 3). Additionally, Kumar’s presentation of the teacher describes him as adhering to a “Brahmanical ideal” with roots that go back again to ancient Indian conceptions of education.

Missing here is a clear understanding of what existed in India prior to the colonial system, i.e. when the administration (particularly in the north) was in Muslim hands. This is not due to any ill intentions on the part of Kumar but is indicative of larger problems within historical studies of India. As a result of the colonial education system, the promotion of English, and the formation of the very religious identities that Kumar highlights as part of the unexpected results of the colonial educational system, Indian intellectuals were also divorced from any connection to their past. Persian and Arabic texts became foreign and representative of Muslim culture alone, not indicative of wider Indian history. Numerous historians, therefore, still spend most of their time delving over English-language sources, with other languages taking a back seat. *Politics of Education in Colonial India* is no different, and almost all the sources used by Kumar are English or Hindi. Naturally, this clouds discussions of pre-colonial India and leaves academics such as Kumar reaching back thousands of years to find Indian history once again. Despite these shortcomings, Krishna Kumar’s work remains important and is an indispensable text for all students and observers of educational and colonial history.

Brian Wright is an Assistant Professor of Islamic World Studies at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi. He holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from McGill University and his dissertation topic focused on the new penal codes created in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and British India, and how both their theory and application relate to pre-modern understandings of Islamic criminal law. Beyond the scope of the dissertation, Dr. Wright is also interested in the impact of colonialism on Muslim intellectual history and how Islamic Law is understood in contemporary Muslim contexts.