

# Language Classroom and Democracy Practicing Critical Pedagogy in Indian Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Critical pedagogy is an educational philosophy that aims to create a progressive and democratic culture in a country through education. In this study, I will classify and review critical pedagogy under three different categories: Early works on critical pedagogy, Neo-Marxist thoughts and Ambedkar's views on critical pedagogy. Ambedkar's social democratic vision for school education based on liberal values is the foundation for critical pedagogy in India. The objectives for practicing critical pedagogy in Indian language classrooms have been formulated by drawing insights from Ambedkar's vision as well as different schools of thoughts of critical pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Critical pedagogy, democracy, Ambedkar's vision, language classrooms

## INTRODUCTION

Education systems should enable schools, teachers and students to understand, question, challenge, negotiate, alter and reconstitute social discourses. They should urge society to critically reflect on its history, social institutions, political system and economic development. India has achieved a stable political and judicial system, significant economic growth and has also made considerable strides in human development. There is relative peace and harmony between different religious, ethnic, linguistic, caste and social groups. Despite socio-economic progress, class, caste, religious and gender inequality remain high in Indian society.

The data given below is indicative of the inequalities in Indian society. On an average, 58 incidents of communal violence were reported in India every month, a total of 3365 instances from 2011 to October 2015 (MHA Annual Report, 2016, p. 85; Dubbudu, 2015). According to the NCRB Annual Report (2014, p. 83) in the year 2013, there were 309,546 crimes reported against women in India, of which there were 118,866 cases of domestic violence, 70,739 cases of molestation, 51,881 cases of kidnapping and 33,707 cases of rape. Violence against Dalits increased by 66 per cent between 2004 to 2014, with 47,064 cases reported in 2014 (NCRB Annual Report, p. 108). This data has been derived from different government reports and includes only recorded incidents. It reflects India's poor performance in maintaining social equalities. Numerical data are used as a reference point to indicate the magnitude of inequalities that prevail in Indian society. In addition, the data indicates that school education has failed to inculcate critical consciousness in students. These issues can be addressed by drafting practical policies and by effective implementation. The long lasting and impactful means, though to redress this, is by developing critical societal consciousness through constant discussion and deliberation.

Primarily, school education is the right platform to inculcate critical consciousness and develop an acceptance for alternative discourse among students. By practicing critical pedagogy in schools, we will open the space for debates and deliberations and furthermore language classrooms are an important site to practice critical pedagogy because language learning is closely connected with culture and social life in multiple and complex ways (Kramsch, 1993). In this paper, I will try to draw insights from different works on critical pedagogy to theorize a way to practice critical pedagogy in Indian schools. In the following section, I will discuss the basic tenets and principles of critical pedagogy.

### **WHAT IS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY?**

Critical pedagogy aims to create a progressive democratic culture in a country through education, media and activism. It is an educational philosophy that strives to create a formative democratic culture by producing critical citizens, who can act as custodians of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian constitution. Practicing critical pedagogy will enable learners to critically analyse social inequalities, make moral judgments about social practices, question common sense knowledge, use dialogues to solve issues and act in a socially responsible way (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988).

Practicing critical pedagogy will nurture the critical consciousness of the learners which will help them to debate and think about issues related to values, justice,

ethics, equality and power. In brief, critical pedagogy trains future citizens to question anti-democratic forces and practices in India. Embracing critical pedagogy can improve the efficacy of democratic institutions around the world and help in ensuring a solid foundation for world peace. These are the broader educational philosophies of critical pedagogy. To put critical pedagogy into operation in Indian schools, clear objectives need to be formulated based on the issues that plague Indian society and democratic institutions. To formulate these objectives, it is essential to review how critical pedagogy is understood by different critical theorists, educational philosophers and applied linguists. It is also essential to understand how critical pedagogy is practiced by educational and language practitioners.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The idea of critical pedagogy comes from the Neo-Marxist school of thought. It was introduced by Paulo Freire (1970), and developed by Henry Giroux (1983, 1988), Stanley Arnowitz (1994), Ira Shor (2013), Bell Hooks (1994), Joe Kincheloe (1991, 2008), Michael Apple (1983, 1990, 2013) and Macedo, Dendrinos and Gounari (2016).

Principles of critical pedagogy were discussed by educationists and critical theorists even before the term critical pedagogy was introduced by Paulo Freire (1970). Many scholars from different schools of thought have attempted to theorize and practice critical pedagogy in different socio-cultural contexts. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they all aspired to understand the operation of societal discourses and create an egalitarian society. In this study, key critical pedagogy works have been classified and reviewed under three different categories: early works on critical pedagogy, Neo-Marxist thoughts on critical pedagogy and Ambedkar's views on critical pedagogy.

### **EARLY WORKS ON CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

The quest for critical enquiry in education is evident from the early 20th century works of Dewey (1902, 2016), Du Bois (1903, 2014), Gramsci (1971) and Vygotsky (1978), scholars from different disciplines of sociology, political science, education and psychology. In all these works, there is an attempt to include critical insights in their respective disciplines. Further, these works offer greater insights for practicing critical pedagogy in Indian schools.

John Dewey was an influential educationist of 20th century and his idea of progressive education was based on his philosophy of pragmatics. According to this philosophy, reality must be experienced and so learners must interact with

the environment to understand and learn social realities. Progressive education promoted by Dewey, construed education as a social construct and learners as social beings. The goal of education therefore should be to integrate school with society. Moreover, the process of learning should be relatable to different problems in life and society. Dewey's progressive education emphasized that pedagogic application should strengthen the principles and practices of democracy. In brief, a progressive school system should include diverse races, colours, creed, nationalities, gender and social classes. Dewey's idea of progressive education has several implications for the contemporary Indian school system and classroom practices. Teachers in Indian schools can relate the process of teaching and learning experience to social reality.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1903, 2014) studied structural and institutional racism in America. His works underscore the inseparability of race and class in the American context. Insights from his works can aid in understanding the interlinks between caste, linguistic ethnicity and class in Indian society. To produce counter discourses against the operation of racism in American society, Du Bois recommended a critical multicultural education. He proposed that critical multicultural education should reclaim the self-consciousness, self-respect and self-realization of the African-Americans (Kincheloe, 2008). These principles can be applied in the Indian educational context as well to empower the subaltern groups. Du Bois also questioned the monopoly of white people's discourses in mainstream education. He proposed the concept of "double consciousness" for subaltern education; that subjugated people should understand prevalent discourses both from the perspective of the dominant culture and the subaltern culture to develop critical insights into knowledge production. By developing "double consciousness", African-Americans would be able to understand the cultural and social privileges of being a White. Du Bois' (1903) ideas of critical multicultural education can be implemented by teachers and language practitioners in India to develop a double consciousness with regards to the Dalit, tribal and religious minority students. By nurturing "double consciousness", the students from marginalized communities will be empowered.

Antonio Gramsci (1971), was a political activist who fought for the welfare of workers against Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy. In the year 1926, he was arrested by Mussolini. While in prison, he wrote thirty different essays which were later named as "Prison Notes". His writings give an in-depth understanding of the operations of the authoritarian regime in Italy and also provided strategies for defeating the hegemonic agenda of the regime. His concepts of traditional and

organic intellectuals, cultural hegemony, war of position and war of manoeuvre are of great relevance to critical pedagogy even today (Rodriguez & Smith, 2013). According to him, traditional intellectuals are trained in a specific academic discipline or profession and they disregard the influence of social class. Organic intellectuals on the other hand, connect their knowledge to the social and cultural experience of the class. Gramsci's insights on the relationship between class and society can help us in understanding class disparities in the Indian context. Teachers can implement Gramsci's ideas by promoting alternative viewpoints and by acknowledging the multiple social realities brought by the students in the classroom. The most important contribution of Gramsci is the concept of cultural hegemony. Education is one of the tools used to maintain the socio-cultural dominance of dominant cultures through pedagogic practices. In the Indian context, to maintain status quo, Gramsci's concepts can be used to challenge multiple dominant cultures.

Vygotsky (1978, 2012) is one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century. His theorization of socio-cognitive psychology has had a huge impact on language learning and teaching. Vygotsky's (2012) works emphasize that educators need to be aware of the social, cultural, political, economic and ideological factors that influence the cognitive development of the child. His works establish the link between societal forces and cognitive development, thus highlighting the mediating role of schools in shaping children's cognition. Indian educators can use Vygotsky's theories to critically look at different types of Indian schools and their role in shaping children's cognition. Using his framework, teachers can help learners to understand and critically reflect on the self and self-knowledge from multiple perspectives. Thus, Vygotsky's socio-cognitive model enables individuals to be self-critical of the dominant forces that influence their cognitive process.

In addition, Vygotsky's works also provide insights into how cognition is mediated by language. He emphasized that individuals can use language as a mediating tool to alter one's consciousness. His socio-cognitive theory explicates that humans are not by-products of a historical or a social process; they can act as agents in shaping their cognitive process. His theories can help teachers understand the crucial role played by Indian schools, teachers and pedagogic materials and textbooks in shaping learners' cognition.

The ideas of Dewey, Du Bois, Gramsci and Vygotsky thus have had a pervasive influence across disciplines and provide a theoretical platform to decipher the complexities involved in Indian school education. Moreover, their views help us to conceptualize critical pedagogy and pedagogic practices in Indian schools.

### NEO-MARXIST THOUGHTS ON CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical pedagogy is influenced by Neo-Marxist critical theorists who believe that the important role played by culture and media in maintaining capitalism and conditions for ideological hegemony is not addressed in Marxist political theory (Kincheloe, 2008). They also believe that many of the social and cultural apparatus are used as tools to ensure the smooth functioning of a capitalist economy. They identify education system as a socio-cultural apparatus that may be used to create knowledge, social relations and social institutions to oppress the voiceless around the world. They believe that a close study of this apparatus can help to unravel the hidden agendas of capitalist economy and dominant cultures. In critical pedagogy influenced by Neo-Marxist thoughts, “criticality” may be understood as a dynamic process to seek reason or social justice.

Paulo Freire, an educationalist from Brazil, worked to improve the literacy of peasants and workers. He believed that adult critical literacy would elevate peasants and workers from oppression. Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy urges teachers and students to question inequalities of power, false myths of opportunity, biased testing procedures and beliefs of dominant cultures. He believes that education systems in most part of the world are used to maintain status quo dominance over the marginalized. To counter these hegemonic practices in education, he introduces five concepts: Conscientizacao (critical consciousness), Praxis, Dialogue, Codification and Decodification. According to Freire, critical pedagogy should develop critical consciousness through pedagogic practices, which will help students to identify the oppressive relations in the education system. However, understanding the nature of oppressive relations alone is not enough to make an individual critical; instead, the critical consciousness that has been developed should be put into concrete action. This action is the beginning point for praxis. Critical consciousness and praxis are developed by generating meaningful dialogue in the school environment. Dialogue should be understood as a form of interaction by students with different knowledge systems and types of social relationships. Indian teachers can use Freire’s tools to establish critical consciousness and inclusive dialogue in the language classrooms.

In his theorization of critical pedagogy, Freire (1985) highlighted the important role of a teacher in the classroom. According to him, teachers play the role of social agents and cultural workers to develop critical consciousness in the learners. In addition, teachers need to elaborate on the social and historical processes involved in creating the dominant discourse. This demands ample space for dialogue which they should provide in the classroom. This applies to Indian classrooms as well.

Henry Giroux further developed Freire's critical pedagogy and named it "Transformation Pedagogy". Transformation Pedagogy seeks to promote radical democracy through pedagogic practices. Giroux said that radical critics of contemporary education offer a critique of current pedagogic practices, but they do not provide any alternatives. He introduced two concepts, "language of critique" and "language of possibility" (Giroux, 1988). According to him, both these concepts are important for constructing counter discourses to achieve social justice. Further, these concepts are important for school teachers in India as they help them to understand how students can explore possible alternatives to negate oppression. According to Giroux, a critical educator should "raise ambitions, desires, and real hope for those who wish to take seriously the issue of educational struggle and social justice" (1988, p. 177). His theorization of radical pedagogy will expand the possibilities for social justice in the Indian educational and cultural domains which can create counter discourses.

Bell Hooks (1994) concept of "Engaged Pedagogy" emphasizes that literacy is an essential tool for feminist movements across the world. According to her, critical literacy will enable women and men to understand the world from a feminist consciousness. Engaged pedagogy is heavily influenced by Freire's critical consciousness. Hooks actively promoted praxis, and stressed that engaged pedagogy requires praxis from both teachers and students. In Indian schools, teachers can use engaged pedagogy to cultivate feminist consciousness among students as it has several implications for understanding the interlacing dynamics of gender, culture, caste and class in Indian classrooms. According to Hooks, a teacher should be a critical practitioner by teaching students in a non-threatening way. Engaged pedagogy should therefore provide a holistic learning environment where there is scope for self-actualization in both teachers and students. The teacher should also be aware of the "community of resistance" from group of students in the classroom.

Michael Apple (1990), a prominent educational theorist believed that schooling should be understood in combination with the political, economic and cultural institutes in the country as these institutes influence the curriculum and teaching practices adopted in the schools. Like Freire, he also proved that schools are not necessarily the engines of democracy. In fact, they are used to maintain the unequal social and economic status of the students through biased curriculum and pedagogic practices. In the Indian context, Apple's theories can help us understand the different types of school systems and the hidden agendas of curriculum used in these schools.

Joe Kincheloe (2008), advocated the concept of "Multilogical Critical Pedagogy"

to understand and counter the dominant discourses which function to protect the interests of the powerful West bloc countries. Multilogical critical pedagogy promotes alternative ethical, ideological, cultural and pedagogical imagination to challenge the world view of education espoused by the western bloc countries. According to Kincheloe, critical pedagogic efforts in school education should encourage transformative multilogicality, that will help students explore the world from diverse perspectives, and not just from the western imperial and neoliberal vantage point (Kincheloe, 2008). Through this process, teachers and learners can uncover the old and new knowledge systems to get a broader perspective and thereby a better understanding of the world. Practicing multilogical critical pedagogy in Indian schools will help students generate counter discourses from a postcolonial and postmodern perspective.

In this study, I have discussed the work of few prominent scholars who theorized and practiced critical pedagogy in the style of the Neo-Marxist school. Critical pedagogy can be practiced in the Indian classroom by drawing insights from these works. However, for a better understanding of Indian society and implementation of critical pedagogy, it is essential also to incorporate Ambedkar's social democratic vision for Indian education. In the next section, I will discuss Ambedkar's thoughts on Indian education.

### **AMBEDKAR'S THOUGHTS ON CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

Ambedkar was a social reformer, economist and the architect of the Indian constitution. He worked to counteract social discrimination and the debilitating practices against the socially oppressed Dalit community. He exhibited an in-depth understanding of caste and gender inequalities in India, and proposed a social democratic vision for school education based on liberal values. Ambedkar identified religious feudalism, patriarchal practices and uneven capital distribution as the fundamental problems faced by the Indian society. He was aware that the constitution alone did not guarantee democracy, so he envisaged a greater role for education in the new Indian democracy. He wanted social democratic school education in India to espouse the value of equality, rational thinking, social justice, scientific spirit and empowerment. He also believed that gender equality and education was fundamental to the growth of modern India. Ambedkar's vision of the Indian school education can become the guiding principle for practicing critical pedagogy in India.

### **PRACTICING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN INDIA**

In a language classroom, textbooks, teacher talk, supplementary materials and

classroom activities are the tools for practicing critical pedagogy. Teachers must provide ample opportunities to students to explore the content of each lesson from multiple perspectives. This enables students to understand different types of social relationships that exist in society. Teacher talk has immense potential in classrooms to expose the hidden agendas in a lesson. A teacher can elaborate on the alternative realities, discourses or versions of incidents described in the lesson to make students from marginalized communities feel included. In some instances, the teacher can also produce supplementary materials to enable students to understand alternative perspectives. The other important tool for practicing critical pedagogy are classroom activities. The teacher should engage the students in sufficient speaking and writing activities to generate more discussions and debates in the classroom. These classroom activities can also play an active role in helping the students to develop critical consciousness. To sum up, critical pedagogy can be used in the Indian classrooms to achieve the following goals:

1. To critically reflect on Indian diversity
2. To sensitize students on issues such as religious polarization, gender inequality, caste, class, gender and religious discrimination in society
3. To make students understand and respect the fundamental rights framed in the constitution
4. To educate students about the importance of maintaining democratic culture in India
5. To teach the students to identify the forces that weaken the democratic institutions in India
6. To train the students to reflect on his or her consciousness to achieve self-emancipation.

By making attempts to implement these goals in language classrooms, teachers and schools can contribute to the creation of a progressive democratic culture in India.

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