

Schooled Into Silence: The Death of Thinking in Indian Education

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Abstract:

This paper grapples with a quietly persistent problem in the Indian education system: a deep-rooted crisis of thinking. It traces how historical legacies, conventional institutional structures, and dominant ideological frameworks have together fostered a pedagogy that values silence over introspection. Even as policy documents like the National Education Policy 2020 speak the language of reform and progressive learning, the reality in many Indian classrooms remains largely unchanged. Memorisation continues to overshadow reflection; conformity is rewarded more than curiosity, and debate is often equated with being disrespectful.

The core argument here is that the crisis is not just curricular. It stems from deeper epistemological assumptions—the ways in which learning itself is conceived, structured, and then analysed. Drawing on thinkers such as Matthew Lipman, Paulo Freire, and Gert Biesta, the paper approaches critical thinking as more than a cognitive skill. It is understood as a reflective, dialogic, and ethically grounded mode of engagement—qualities that are often sidelined in a system driven by outcomes, metrics, and examination success.

There is also a concern about how terms like “critical thinking” have been superficially adopted in national frameworks, such as the NCERT Learning Outcomes, without a genuine shift in pedagogic intent. This tokenism, coupled with the systematic marginalisation of the humanities and philosophical inquiry, has gradually eroded students’ capacity for ethical reflection and civic engagement.

What the current moment demands, the paper suggests, is not another layer of reform, but a more foundational rethinking of education itself. This means moving away from a delivery-oriented, standardised model toward one that places inquiry, dialogue, and philosophical contemplation at its core. In a society as plural and contested as India, the cultivation of the capacity to question, to imagine otherwise, and to hold space for dissent is not optional. It is essential—not only for learners to grow, but for democracy to endure.

Keywords: National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Indian Education System, Critical Thinking, Pedagogy.

Introduction: The Plight of Unquestioning Minds

Following major educational statements such as India’s National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020), it could be concluded that the Indian student is finally equipped to become a thinking person. Catchphrases like “critical thinking”, “holistic development”, and “experiential learning” do appear in policy documents

and curriculum frameworks (India 3, 6). However, Indian classrooms still treat students as passive recipients rather than independent thinkers.

Education in India's school system remains a passive exchange of knowledge rather than an agitation of thinking. The child is still rewarded for reproducing, rather than asking why. Even while digital infrastructure grows and NEP-infused syllabi offer "outcomes", the student's inner life remains pedagogically irrelevant—their moral issues, ontological uncertainties, cultural contacts, and philosophical predicaments are not properly handled by the updated school curriculum.

This issue has been curated structurally and historically since colonial times. The goal of India's colonially utilitarian educational system was to create bureaucrats who had to be docile, submissive, and administratively effective, rather than critical citizens. It was never meant to generate intellectual autonomy; it was designed to produce subservience, which could be useful to the Empire in those times. In discussing colonial education's legacy, Krishna Kumar (2005) notes that "the educational enterprise was to ensure that the Indian became a willing subject of the empire" (30), a design that prioritised obedience over intellectual autonomy, as seen in today's rote-driven classrooms.

However, that purpose is supposed to be no longer in use. Yet, instead of a failure of reform, we find now a refusal to reconsider what "learning" might imply in a diverse, contested, and increasingly digital India (Macaulay 107–117). This is echoed in Kumar's analysis, as reviewed by Chacko, which explains how colonial education structured the child as a passive subject within an exam-centric, centrally controlled system (Chacko 935).

Amidst the din of employability and "skill-based" education, India postulates a silence on ethics, logic, philosophy, pluralism, and enquiry in its population's minds. Such a mindset carries grave civilisational consequences. A democracy cannot survive on data memorisation. Such an education fosters a subconscious obtuse mindset. A plural society cannot thrive without a sympathetic imagination, and a civilisation as rich and diverse as India's cannot exist unless its students and people are taught to understand not only their textbooks, but also the differences of various subparts of our society. Because it builds the very problematic nature of a lack of 'empathetic understanding' towards differences in one's mind. It is difficult to implement superficial curriculum changes. Instead, an epistemological revolution focusing on critical thinking, philosophical reasoning, and cultural awareness and empathy has to be imperative.

The article argues that education must prepare the minds to confront, question, empathise, and construct. Only such an education can produce ideal citizens capable of maintaining the democratic, intellectual, and moral decorum of the Indian republic.

Situating the Problem — The Residue of Colonial Education

When Thomas Babington Macaulay articulated his vision of creating a class of Indians "English in taste, beliefs, morals, and intellect" in *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), his objective was not to foster intellectual economy but to cultivate a class of clerks. He was also codifying the model for bureaucracy: individuals deprived of their indigenous knowledge systems were instructed to focus more on replication than reflection (107–117).

Nearly two centuries later, the structural blueprint he suggested remains discernible in Indian classrooms. Despite the nation's progressive approach, the pedagogical architecture continues to mirror colonial objectives. Across most classrooms—whether government or private, rural or urban—the pattern is almost the same: the teacher speaks, students listen, and memory is mistaken for domain mastery. Students are

still supposed to memorise dates and definitions, not to explore the causes, consequences of such historical events. Their success is narrowly defined by their ability to reproduce sanctioned knowledge. Board exams, as well as competitive exams, have become merely a test of memory and not a demonstration of intellectual, creative and critical skills. Students who dare to challenge the accepted narratives found in textbooks or question a teacher's interpretation are termed disruptive or disrespectful. The dominant culture of 'conformity' remains deeply ingrained in our society, diminishing the potential for critical discourse in both pedagogical practices and classroom interactions.

This aligns with how curriculum subtly codes silence, conformity, and exclusion as pedagogical virtues. The NCERT's Learning Outcomes at the Elementary Stage (2017) lays bare this trend, offering a template where educational success is reduced to observable, performative behaviours. Learning is quantified in terms of "identifies," "names," and "responds" — verbs that mirror the logic of task completion rather than the cultivation of critical or imaginative faculties (NCERT 6–9). This performative framework is further reinforced by the booming coaching industry, which trains students not to understand, but to eliminate options and reproduce keywords. Even where reformative policies like the National Education Policy 2020 invoke critical thinking, they often fall short in operational clarity, leaving the core complication of passive learning unresolved.

However, editorials such as Thankachan's do interpret the policy's emphasis on critical thinking and experiential learning as a decisive break from rote pedagogies (Thankachan 140). "Critical thinking" is listed as a skill, but there is no explanation of how it will be approached, taught, assessed, or built into the very system. (India 12–13).

The implications of such an education system are far-reaching. Thinking invites questioning, and questioning disrupts certainties. In politically sensitive times, certainty is easier to control than intellectual unrest. As a result, curricula are sanitised, history is simplified to avoid controversy, and difficult conversations are deferred. The outcome is a populace trained to memorise facts but unequipped to critically evaluate them. The nation ends up developing citizens who can vote but cannot engage in discussions; graduates who can code, calculate, and pass university exams but struggle to justify a moral choice or understand a cultural contradiction. This intellectual conditioning, maintained through systemic design, makes a society suspicious of difference and assumes that debate is equivalent to disrespect. The inability to cultivate empathetic imagination and philosophical engagement leads to the "othering" of communities, further fraying the pluralistic fabric of the nation. The stakes, therefore, are not educational ones—they are civilisational ones.

What Critical Thinking Truly Means and How It Needs to Be Meant

The concept of "critical thinking" is frequently referenced, but in actual classroom settings, the invocation of critical thinking often becomes a matter of rhetoric rather than substance. Matthew Lipman, a pioneer in the Philosophy for Children movement, asserted that true thinking must be reflective, reasonable, and responsible. These qualities cannot be sufficiently developed through methodologies reliant on multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank tasks, or rote memorisation (Lipman 27–28).

This echoes Lipman's concern that educational institutions conflate teaching about thinking with teaching for thinking, often resulting in shallow, disconnected pedagogy (Lipman 64–66). Educators encourage students to "think" critically, syllabi cite it as a fundamental objective, but when pushed, both students and educators struggle to articulate its true meaning and application. It poses another risk. When a term is excessively circulated without any clear definition, it ultimately loses its value. Therefore, it becomes

imperative to restore critical thinking to its proper conceptual framework.

Fundamentally, critical thinking refers to the capacity to analyse information, claims, opinions, and arguments with the aid of logic, rationale, evidence, and reflective thought. It does not imply a negative form of criticism. Instead, it represents a disciplined mental process in which reasoning is systematically applied to determine what deserves belief and what has to be disregarded (Lipman 18–19). Such thinking practices build an awareness in one's mind that every information is inherently biased; no text, statement, ideology, statistic, or assertion is devoid of assumptions and prejudice. A critical thinker questions: Who presents this claim? What evidence validates it? What is omitted here? What are the consequences of acceptance or rejection? These enquiries do not arise impulsively; they require exponential and continuous instruction and cultivation (21–22).

These are skills learned not by rote from model answers, but by being challenged with hard questions, exposed to different viewpoints, and required to reason through moral conundrums. The problem, however, is that in most school environments, intelligence hardly ever applies to precision and understanding, not to speed. Whereas, critical thinking is often non-linear, emotionally hard and intellectually humiliating. It flourishes in classrooms that are comfortable with discomfort, that have deliberately met it and made it an ally, that see doubt not as a failure of knowledge, but as a beginning. This trend of memorising facts extends even to literature and humanities classes, which have to be rich in interpretative and creative engagement. Now the discourse in literature, humanities, and similar subjects, in most of the colleges and universities, is about summarising plots and copying stated themes to write answers and fill up pages in answer booklets.

While thinkers like Lipman argue for the dialogic and indeterminate nature of critical thinking, the NCERT's 2017 learning outcomes reflect an operationalist pedagogy. For example, in early grades, learning is defined through phrases like “reads with appropriate pause,” “counts objects up to 100,” or “recalls multiplication tables up to 10” (NCERT 7–10), reducing learning to controlled input-output acts. Moreover, the dominant definition of “intelligence” in India is profoundly associated with haste and precision: swift calculations, immaculate answers, and high scores. Whereas critical thinking is, at times, often a slow, painstaking, and unresolved process. It flourishes in environments where uncertainty is tolerated and even welcomed, where debate is encouraged, and where vagueness is not a hindrance but a catalyst for deeper exploration, but such milieus are, by and large, absent in Indian academia.

Additionally, it is crucial to differentiate between ‘critical thinking’ and mere ‘contrarianism’. Opposing viewpoints simply for the sake of dissent to stand out is not a demonstration of critical thinking; rather, it creates a reactive stance. Genuine critical thinking establishes the notion that one has to have the readiness to review one's position in light of compelling evidence or reasoning. At its essence, it embodies an intellectual ethic and duty.

The Humanities in Education

This systematic downgrading of thinking to a skill, and of education to measurable outcomes, is not an isolated pedagogical error—it reflects a wider ideological restructuring of epistemic priorities. Performance, efficiency, and standardisation now override depth, reflection, and dissent. What is celebrated as ‘quality’ education is often little more than an audit-friendly apparatus, more concerned with datafication of outcomes than the complexity of human thought. In such a model, education ceases to be a space for interrogation and becomes a site of intellectual compliance.

If we are to take “critical thinking” seriously without limiting it to a ritualistic phrase buried in policy

PDFs, then Indian education must undergo an epistemological insurrection. These are not incremental reforms; they represent deeply radical propositions aimed at exposing the foundational flaws in our educational paradigms. Rather than calling for improved implementation, each proposition challenges us to reimagine the very possibilities of education itself.

The traditional Indian classroom, in most cases, remains a ‘theatre of hierarchy’. It often operates within hierarchical structures that mirror social stratifications, which warrants a re-evaluation through the lens of participatory pedagogy and dialogic learning. Educators should not merely enforce established knowledge; rather, they ought to function as facilitators. Their job is to nurture inquiry, to tolerate and even welcome questions that might unsettle the status quo. Yet, it is hard to ignore how any hint of dissent in the classroom tends to cause collective anxiety. Why is disagreement treated like a threat? The roots of this issue are cultural. There’s a longstanding discomfort with ambiguity, a tendency to equate obedience with learning and silence with respect in our culture. Within this framework, disagreement is viewed as disrespectful, rather than as evidence of genuine engagement. Such tendencies invite reflection on how prevailing cultural and pedagogical norms might be reoriented to embrace intellectual dissent as a pedagogical asset. We should institutionalise the idea that respectful dissent is not only acceptable but essential—it shows students are thinking. Until educators are trained to embrace intellectual unrest, rather than suppress it, we’re not producing thoughtful citizens. Educational outcomes often privilege compliance over inquiry, potentially leading to learners who can reproduce knowledge efficiently but rarely interrogate its foundations.

The current pedagogical emphasis on memorisation risks conflating the power of recall with intellectual depth, thereby undermining more expansive conceptions of intelligence and conscience. The whole structure of assessment needs to move away from surveillance and toward authentic reflection. Evaluation should prompt students to think, not just regurgitate. This has been echoed by Thankachan, who cites initiatives like internships, fieldwork, and practical engagements in Indian institutions such as IIT Bombay and the Rishi Valley School as emblematic of this shift (141). Imagine if, instead of asking, “What is secularism?” exams challenged students with, “Can secularism survive in a religious society?” Or rather than listing causes of a revolt, war or change, students were asked, “What makes a change inevitable in any society?” Achieving this shift means giving up our obsession with metrics and rankings. We ought to prioritise argument over rote answers, deliberation over rote delivery, and intellectual bravery over simple factual recall. Only then does assessment become a true exercise in learning, not just a performance for the gradebook.

There has to be a call for a fundamental shift: using existing subjects as opportunities for inquiry and debate rather than mere rote memorisation. Paulo Freire’s problem-posing education offers a model, where ‘the students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher,’ enabling them to critically engage with their world (81). This approach could transform Indian classrooms into spaces of active inquiry. Educators ought to present material as something to be examined and questioned, encouraging students to engage with content actively. This approach will foster deeper understanding and place thoughtful analysis at the heart of learning:

- In history, the focus can move from “who ruled when” to “how power legitimises itself,” “who writes history and why,” and “what does forgetting or altering history cost?” Or can complement factual recall with thematic inquiries into the mechanisms of power, narrative construction, and historical memory.
- In science, students should ask: “Should all that can be invented be invented?” and “What is the ethical

boundary of discovery?”

- In literature, the aim should not be to just quote themes, but to use narrative as a tool for finding identity, justice, trauma, and truth.
- In language learning, students ought to explore how syntax can encode social hierarchies and how grammar can govern ideology.

Where NCERT defines success through “naming body parts” and “recognising patterns” (NCERT 8–9), Freire reminds us that authentic learning emerges when learners interrogate their reality, not merely label it (Freire 55).

Therefore, thinking must not be taught just as “skill development”. In a country as fissured as India, where identities such as caste, religion, sectarianism, community, language, gender, and region remain sites of daily disputation, the act of thinking is nothing but a form of cultural, social, and political hygiene.

And this requires that we abandon the national fetish for correct answers and embrace the beautiful discomfort of unanswerable questions. When a student learns to live with complexity, and dwells in ambiguity without panic, to entertain contradictory truths without seeking refuge in dogma—that is when critical thinking begins.

The Philosophical Deficit — Why Indian Classrooms Ignore Inquiry

The absence of philosophical inquiry in Indian classrooms represents a critical deficit in the educational landscape, particularly in a nation poised on the brink of democratic governance. Fundamental civic and ethical questions, such as the nature of justice, the moral implications of actions, the coexistence of tradition and progress, and the responsibilities of lawful obedience, are vital for every citizen, especially in a democratic society. But policy orientations toward standardisation and behavioural outcomes raise questions about whether education is being shaped to reinforce obedience as a civic virtue.

It is paradoxical that a nation with such a rich philosophical legacy, which encompasses diverse schools of thought, restricts its inclusion in educational practices. Philosophy is often dismissed as irrelevant due to its perceived lack of immediate economic utility or vocational applicability. Furthermore, it is regarded as dangerous because it invites students to scrutinise established social norms, religious doctrines, power dynamics, social strata, and national myths. Engaging with philosophy creates risk in the minds of people in power that it can disturb prevailing certainties, challenge overly simplistic ideologies, and resist intellectual dogmatism. As such, an educational approach that effectively integrates philosophical discourse becomes a site of potential dissent, which establishments find unsettling. An educational space that dares to encourage such interrogation inevitably becomes suspect in the eyes of power. This unease is not unfounded—“philosophy of education has engaged and should continue to engage in thoughtful interruption of institutionally grinding forms of bias, misrecognition, and ignorance” (Jackson et al. 1137). It is precisely this risk of interruption that causes philosophical reasoning to be systematically pushed out of educational priorities.

The repercussions of this educational deficit are significant. Students who are not given a structured exposure to philosophical reasoning may display intellectual dependency on others. They might excel in examinations or career pursuits, but they lack the critical tools necessary to navigate ethical complexities, cultural tensions, or political rhetoric.

Philosophy asks us to address underlying principles—such as reason, truth, value, existence, and power. Sociology gives us the ability to study institutions, inequalities, and the social processes of reproduction. Literature gives us the opportunity to feel the inner lives of others and to construct moral, ethical and

psychological sympathy in multicultural and multitemporal worlds. Critical theory evaluates the taken-for-granted norms, compelling us to reconstruct how language, systems, media, and representation construct perceptions, auditory worlds, and systems of belief. Cultural studies then anchors these questions within the multifaceted, lived worlds of caste, class, gender, religion, society, and region.

It isn't esoteric knowledge; it is existential knowledge. Literature and language are not merely academic disciplines—they are sites of trauma, identity, resistance, and memory. When students read a Dalit autobiography, a Partition novel, or a postcolonial literature, they are not merely reading a story—they are seeing how lives get built by structures and how language and identity are hired as a weapon of survival. These knowledge sciences are not add-ons to practical knowledge but are instead the very texture of reality itself. Instead of being definitive answers, they develop a more profound model for posing questions—and in so doing, they give us the most precious of qualities: the capacity to think, to feel, and to act with greater awareness.

If Indian education continues to overlook this vital aspect of philosophical thought, it risks producing citizens ill-equipped to engage meaningfully in the democratic process—not due to a lack of information, but because they were never taught how to interrogate the information they receive.

If we are serious about addressing these deficits, then multiculturalism, just as a checklist, is insufficient. This strategy redefines national unity rather than undermining it. Unity built on understanding—on a genuine, dialogic engagement with difference—is far more resilient than unity built on denial or erasure. The alternative is a society of technically competent but culturally incapacitated citizens: individuals who are equipped to operate in the global marketplace, yet unable to recognise or relate to the diversity of their nation. Veldhuis explains that, in “Not for Profit”, Nussbaum stresses the importance of cultivating empathy, dissent, and pluralist understanding through humanities education (Veldhuis 98–99).

In conclusion, pluralism is neither a fact to be committed to memory nor a catchphrase to be repeated. It is an activity—a collection of routines, attitudes, and intellectual qualities that need to be developed via life experience, critical discourse, and prolonged introspection.

Education Beyond Employability — Against the Factory of the Mindless

Every form of employment, after all, is embedded in a thick web of moral, social, and political context. Engineers aren't just assembling gadgets—they're building surveillance infrastructure that raises questions about privacy and control. Journalists aren't only sharing news; sometimes, they're producing propaganda that shapes public opinion. Even teachers, administrators, and doctors aren't immune to carrying biases about caste or gender.

Such pedagogical models risk producing citizens habituated to reactive rather than reflective engagement—less comfortable with ambiguity and more inclined toward performance over inquiry. The symptoms are everywhere: in the daily collapse of civic dialogue, in the shrillness of public debate, in a populace trained to respond to prompts but rarely encouraged to formulate their own.

What does that look like in practice? For one, philosophy has to be taught as a living practice, not just as historical trivia. Critical theory can't be kept on the margins as some radical curiosity; it is a necessary tool for making sense of society's messes. Literature shouldn't be about memorising plotlines—it should be about tearing down and reconstructing worldviews, about seeing yourself and others anew. The purpose of education must shift: not to “place” students in the market, but to help them find their place in a plural, constantly shifting society. In a country where every student has to navigate the intersecting realities of caste, gender, religion, language, politics, and power daily, an education that ignores these complexities

is worse than incomplete—it's complicit in maintaining the very injustices it ought to challenge. Reintegrating critical, ethical, and cultural inquiry into education may help facilitate a shift from utilitarian models of schooling toward the formation of reflective, socially conscious individuals.

Thinking as Resistance: A Democratic Necessity

There's a curious, almost predictable sequence to the way authoritarian regimes handle dissent, and it often starts with the burning of books. That's not just dramatic flair—it's a calculated move. Why? Because the act of thinking, especially the kind that isn't polite or pre-approved, stands as the most potent form of resistance a society can muster. Independent thought disrupts. It interrogates the status quo. It preserves collective memory, even when those in power would rather it be wiped clean (Freire 52–59).

The structure and delivery of India's educational system often disincentivise independent thinking, privileging conformity over critical engagement. Ennis emphasises that this requires explicit training in logic and subject-specific reasoning (6), a stark contrast to India's exam culture, where students are rewarded for reproducing “model answers” rather than constructing original arguments. For decades, the system has prioritised rote memorisation, as if the accumulation of facts were sufficient preparation for citizenship. The consequences are profound. When students are denied the tools to ask fundamental questions—What is justice? What is truth? Who holds authority, and why?—They are deprived of the very essence of education. Education, in this sense, ceases to be a process of intellectual empowerment and becomes, instead, an act of abandonment (Freire 55–57).

Therefore, the responsibility is to rethink education as a disruptive force that challenges ingrained beliefs and encourages students to doubt, question, and create rather than as a tool that shapes people to fit into preexisting commercial or social structures.

Disciplines such as philosophy, critical theory, and cultural studies shall not remain the preserve of elite institutions or optional courses. They are indispensable for preparing individuals to live with ambiguity, contradiction, and complexity. Without this foundation, social cohesion becomes fragile, and the possibility of collective life itself is threatened. These are the attributes that sustain a vibrant, plural society (Biesta 42). Echoing Biesta's critique, the Indian policy landscape exemplifies a drift towards educational instrumentality. The NCERT's 2017 learning outcomes document, while claiming to ensure foundational literacy and numeracy, is silent on values like autonomy, wonder, or epistemic curiosity—all of which Biesta groups under “subjectification” (Biesta 42; NCERT 5–6).

To achieve this, we must place thinking at the very heart of educational practice. This is not a minor adjustment but a radical act—one that demands vigilance, courage, and a willingness to defend the space for independent thought against all encroachments. Only then can education fulfil its highest purpose: the creation of citizens who are capable not only of surviving but of flourishing together in a complex and contested world.

If Indian education keeps ignoring these subjects for the sake of efficiency or market demand, it risks creating people who lack empathy. The humanities do not reduce employability; they make us more human. Ultimately, that is the most important education of all.

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