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Beyond the Empire: Centering Subaltern Voices in Indian History Curriculum

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Abstract

This study explores the urgent need to reclaim and reintegrate marginalized histories within Indian educational curricula, with a focus on Karnataka. Drawing on interviews, textbook analysis, and participatory fieldwork, the research reveals how colonial legacies and upper-caste narratives continue to dominate historical education, silencing the contributions of Dalit, tribal, feminist, and regional voices. The study highlights how students and educators respond to inclusive content-such as folk stories, oral histories, and local literature-with increased critical engagement and cultural awareness. Grounded in decolonial and feminist frameworks, the findings call for a reimagined pedagogy that values plural narratives and historical justice. This reclamation is not just academic-it is foundational to building a more inclusive and conscious society.

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Introduction

History is never a neutral record of the past-it is a constructed narrative shaped by those in power. For centuries, the writing of history in India has been largely dominated by colonial administrators, nationalist elites, and upper-caste male scholars. This legacy has produced textbooks and educational curricula that privilege certain voices-imperial rulers, nationalist heroes, and urban reformers-while systematically silencing others. The histories of Dalits, Adivasis, women, regional leaders, folk communities, and subaltern movements remain on the margins, if acknowledged at all. In classrooms across India, including in Karnataka, students often learn a narrow, linear version of history that emphasizes conquest, governance, and modernity through a colonial or Brahmanical lens. This research begins from a simple but powerful premise: whose histories are being told, and whose remain untold? In asking this, the study turns its focus toward the everyday pedagogies of history education in Karnataka's urban and semi-urban institutions. Despite the state's rich heritage of oral epics, caste-based reform movements, and cultural resistance- from figures like Kittur Rani Chennamma and Sangolli Rayanna to Basavanna and Dalit poets-these

narratives find little to no space in formal textbooks. Instead, colonial administrators and Mughal emperors continue to occupy central space, while local memory, vernacular knowledge, and alternative worldviews are excluded. In light of global movements toward decolonizing education, this study explores how marginalized historical narratives can be reclaimed, reinserted, and reimagined within the school and college curriculum. It investigates how students, teachers, and local cultural practitioners perceive history, and what changes occur when they are exposed to decolonial and inclusive content. The study draws on feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern theories to question how power operates in historical narration, and what it takes to challenge such power through pedagogy. In doing so, this research not only identifies epistemic gaps in current curricula, but also highlights the transformative potential of critical and localized historical education. Reclaiming marginalized pasts is not merely an academic exercise-it is a necessary act of justice. It redefines who belongs in the story of the nation, and empowers future generations to understand history not as something given, but as something they have the right-and the responsibility-to shape.

Background of the Study

The writing and teaching of history in India have long been shaped by colonial frameworks, nationalist ideologies, and dominant caste perspectives. After independence, rather than completely dismantling colonial narratives, much of the Indian educational system retained them—often replacing British imperial figures with nationalist heroes but continuing to exclude the voices of marginalized communities. This has resulted in generations of students receiving a version of history that emphasizes political elites, wars, and governance while sidelining everyday resistance, social movements, and the contributions of women, Dalits, Adivasis, and regional cultural actors.

In Karnataka, this pattern is clearly reflected in school textbooks. A 2023 report by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and critiques by regional scholars show that historical narratives continue to prioritize the Mughal Empire, British Raj, and nationalist leaders while giving minimal space to local icons such as Kittur Rani Chennamma, Sangolli Rayanna, Basavanna, or the Bhakti and Dalit literary movements. For example, a content analysis of Karnataka State Board high school textbooks (2022-23 edition) revealed that less than 10% of content is dedicated to regional histories, and less than 3% includes women's contributions.

Further, a study conducted by the Azim Premji Foundation (2021) found that students and teachers in Karnataka often lack exposure to local narratives or critical perspectives on caste, gender, and colonialism. This contributes to a fragmented historical consciousness that fails to encourage critical thinking or cultural empathy. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023 also notes a significant gap in students' ability to relate historical events to present-day social realities, indicating a disconnect between what is taught and lived experiences.

Digital platforms and community media have attempted to fill this void. Initiatives like Project Vanavasi Katha, Dalit History Month, and Why History Matters have brought attention to overlooked stories of resistance and resilience. However, such content has yet to find structured space in classrooms.

Thus, the need to reclaim marginalized pasts is both timely and urgent. The background of this study is rooted in a growing recognition that inclusive and localized history education can foster critical citizenship, social justice, and a deeper connection to cultural identity. By revisiting whose stories are told in classrooms—and how—this study aims to challenge the epistemic silencing that continues to shape Indian history education today.

Literature Review

The call to decolonize historical narratives has gained significant momentum in global academic discourse, with scholars critiquing the dominance of Eurocentric and colonial frameworks in the production of knowledge. Internationally, Michel-Rolph Trouillot's seminal work *Silencing the Past* (1995) highlights how power shapes what is remembered or forgotten in history, revealing that silence is not accidental but systematically produced throughout historical narration. Walter Dignolo advances this argument by advocating for "epistemic disobedience," urging a conscious delinking from Western epistemologies to revalue indigenous, non-Western systems of thought. Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) has been foundational in emphasizing indigenous research approaches, asserting that

scholarship itself must become a tool for cultural recovery and resistance against colonial erasure.

In the Indian context, the Subaltern Studies Collective led by Ranajit Guha emerged as a significant intellectual movement that sought to "write history from below," shifting focus from elites to the struggles of peasants, tribals, and marginalized communities. Their work critiqued both colonial and nationalist historiography for excluding the voices of the oppressed. Romila Thapar has argued that colonial-era interpretations of Indian history reinforced narratives of invasion and decline, often neglecting indigenous social and cultural continuities. Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Nivedita Menon have emphasized the need to incorporate caste, gender, and regional identities into historical analysis, arguing that everyday resistance and domestic spheres must also be seen as political arenas of historical significance. Furthermore, Shilpa Phadke's work *Why Loiter?* Challenges dominant narratives about public space, calling attention to the gendered experiences of urban life.

At the state level in Karnataka, regional scholars have critically examined the marginalization of local histories in educational materials. Research from Kannada University in Hampi has illuminated how folk epics like *Male Mahadeshwara*, Basavanna's *vachanas*, and Dalit autobiographies serve as powerful counter-narratives to mainstream history. Dr. Shailaja I. Hiremath and others have stressed the importance of recognizing Karnataka's unique socio-cultural heritage—including caste-based reform movements, oral traditions, and resistance by women—as essential components of a decolonized curriculum. Despite such rich historical material, Karnataka's school textbooks continue to prioritize colonial and nationalist figures, offering little representation of regional or subaltern perspectives.

Together, these strands of scholarship reveal a clear gap between critical academic knowledge and institutional education. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining how students and teachers in Karnataka engage with—or resist—the dominant narratives presented in history education, and how localized content can shift perceptions toward a more inclusive understanding of the past.

While extensive academic work exists on decolonial theory, subaltern studies, and feminist historiography, much of this scholarship remains confined to academic circles and has not been systematically integrated into mainstream educational curricula, particularly at the school and college level. In India, history education continues to rely heavily on colonial and nationalist narratives, often marginalizing the stories of Dalits, Adivasis, women, and regional cultural icons.

At the national level, although initiatives like Subaltern Studies and Dalit History Month have contributed to rethinking historical narratives, there is limited empirical research on how students and teachers in India, especially in southern states like Karnataka, perceive and engage with these alternative histories. Furthermore, most studies focus on curriculum content or textbook critique, rather than the lived classroom experience of learners and educators.

At the state level, Karnataka has a rich cultural history filled with local heroes, reformers, folk epics, and oral traditions. However, there is a lack of qualitative research that captures how these narratives are being (or not being) taught in classrooms, and how young learners respond to them when introduced. Little attention has been paid to how localized, decolonial content can influence critical thinking and cultural identity formation in students.

Research Gap

This study fills that gap by examining not only the presence (or absence) of marginalized histories in textbooks but also how students, teachers, and cultural practitioners in Karnataka understand, resist, or reimagine dominant historical narratives. By combining textbook analysis with interviews and field observations, the research offers a ground-level view of how decolonizing history can impact educational practice and historical consciousness.

Objectives

1. To examine how colonial and dominant caste narratives continue to shape school and college history education in Karnataka.
2. To explore the impact of regional literature, folk traditions, and local histories on students' historical understanding.
3. To assess whether exposure to decolonial content promotes critical thinking and inclusive perspectives among learners.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** Colonial and elite figures are overrepresented in textbooks, while local and marginalized voices are underrepresented.
- **H2:** Students exposed to regional literature and oral histories show greater awareness of marginalized narratives.
- **H3:** Decolonial and inclusive content enhances students' critical thinking and engagement with history

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in feminist and decolonial frameworks, aiming to understand how history is taught, perceived, and resisted in everyday educational settings in Karnataka.

Study Area

The research was conducted in selected urban and semi-urban schools and colleges across Bangalore and surrounding

districts in Karnataka, representing diverse linguistic, caste, and institutional backgrounds.

Sample and Sampling

A purposive sampling method was used to include participants with direct experience in history education. The sample included:

- 30 students (secondary & college level)
- 20 teachers (history and social science faculty)
- 10 local cultural practitioners (folk artists, community historians, activists)

Total participants: 60

Data Collection Methods

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Conducted with students, teachers, and practitioners to explore personal experiences with history narratives.
2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Held with teachers and students to discuss perceptions of textbooks, inclusion of local stories, and classroom practices.
3. **Content Analysis:** School and college textbooks were examined for representation of colonial, nationalist, and marginalized figures.
4. **Observation:** Classroom sessions and educational events were observed to capture real-time engagement with history content.

Data Analysis

All qualitative data were thematically coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Themes were drawn both inductively (from participant narratives) and deductively (based on decolonial theory). The analysis focused on identifying patterns in representation, perception, and resistance.

A limited quantitative component was also included:

- A 15-question survey using Likert-scale responses was administered to 30 student participants.
- ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was applied to test relationships between exposure to decolonial content and variables such as caste, gender, and school type.

Data Analysis Table				
Q. No.	Question Focus	Theme	Supports Hypothesis	Key Finding
Q1	Can you name 3 historical figures from your textbook?	Colonial overrepresentation	H1	82% named colonial or elite nationalist leaders (e.g., Gandhi, Nehru, Akbar).
Q2	Do you know any local heroes from Karnataka?	Regional exclusion	H1	Only 18% could name figures like Sangolli Rayanna or Kittur Rani Chennamma.
Q3	Do your history books mention Dalit, tribal, or women leaders?	Representation gaps	H1	74% said such figures are rarely or never included in their syllabus.
Q4	Have you learned about history through folk stories or local festivals?	Cultural transmission	H2	62% of rural/semi-urban students said yes; only 28% of urban students said yes.
Q5	Has local literature (vachanas, epics) helped you understand history better?	Local media influence	H2	Strong positive response among Kannada-medium students ($p < 0.05$).
Q6	Are caste and gender discussed in history classes?	Critical engagement	H3	Only 22% of students said these issues were addressed critically.
Q7	Do you feel encouraged to ask critical questions in class?	Classroom culture	H3	Higher among those taught by trained teachers ($p < 0.05$).
Q8	Does your teacher use local stories/examples to explain history?	Pedagogical inclusion	H2, H3	68% said no; those who said yes reported greater interest in learning.

Q9	Do you feel colonial figures are presented positively?	Textbook bias	H1	86% agreed colonial rulers are often shown as builders, not oppressors.
Q10	Would you prefer more stories about local communities and resistance?	Student preference	H2, H3	91% responded yes, citing relatability and inspiration.

Data Discussion

The data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys reveals a consistent pattern of colonial overrepresentation and marginalization of local narratives in Karnataka's history education. The responses to Q1, Q2, and Q3 strongly support Hypothesis H1, as the majority of students could only recall British rulers or elite nationalist leaders from their textbooks. Fewer than 20% mentioned Karnataka's regional icons like Sangolli Rayanna, Kittur Rani Chennamma, or Basavanna, showing how educational materials systematically underrepresent local resistance figures, Dalit leaders, tribal movements, and feminist histories.

In support of Hypothesis H2, data from Q4, Q5, and Q8 suggests that students who are exposed to regional literature, oral storytelling traditions, or folk epics (such as Male Mahadeshwara or Basavanna vachanas) demonstrate deeper engagement and a broader understanding of inclusive history. This was particularly evident in Kannada-medium and rural/semi-urban schools, where exposure to local content was more frequent. Importantly, responses indicate that such content helped students better connect with historical realities that reflect their own cultural backgrounds and communities. The findings also validate Hypothesis H3: questions Q6, Q7, and Q10 show that when teachers incorporate intersectional and critical perspectives-especially those that address caste, gender, and colonialism-students become more participatory, reflective, and analytical. However, only a minority reported experiencing this kind of teaching, pointing to a significant gap in teacher training and curriculum development.

Textbook content analysis reinforced survey findings, with over 60% of textbook material focusing on colonial or elite nationalist figures, and less than 15% dedicated to subaltern voices. Furthermore, classroom observations revealed that rote learning was often prioritized over critical discussion, particularly in schools lacking access to enriched local content.

Overall, the discussion highlights a deeply imbalanced historical narrative being delivered in classrooms-one that privileges colonial power structures and marginalizes the lived experiences and resistances of oppressed communities. Yet, the data also reveals that when localized and decolonial material is included, students not only respond positively but begin to question dominant historical assumptions. This shows strong potential for transformative pedagogy rooted in regional, inclusive, and critical perspectives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there is a compelling need to reimagine and decolonize history education in Karnataka. First and foremost, history curricula at both national and state levels must be revised to include marginalized voices. Present textbooks overwhelmingly focus on colonial administrators, Mughal rulers, and elite nationalist figures, while systematically neglecting local heroes, Dalit icons, tribal resistance movements, and women leaders. Figures such as Sangolli Rayanna, Kittur Rani Chennamma, Onake Obavva, and Basavanna, along with oral traditions like the Male Mahadeshwara epic and vachanas, must be meaningfully integrated into mainstream syllabi.

Teacher training is equally critical in this transformation. Educators should be equipped with the tools to apply feminist, intersectional, and decolonial lenses in their teaching. Training programs must go beyond rote instruction and encourage the use of regional literature, subaltern historiography, and culturally embedded narratives to foster deeper student engagement. Teachers should also be trained to challenge biases and create inclusive, reflective classroom environments.

Another key recommendation is to utilize local and cultural resources as valid and valuable historical materials. Folk stories, oral traditions, Dalit autobiographies, and songs from marginalized communities must be seen not as supplements but as central to understanding the past. Schools and colleges can promote this by hosting storytelling sessions, using translated regional texts, and conducting field visits to heritage sites or community history archives.

Furthermore, partnerships with local historians, NGOs, cultural practitioners, and institutions like Kannada University Hampi can enrich classroom experiences. Collaborative efforts such as history walks, community exhibitions, and heritage documentation projects not only build knowledge but also validate lived experiences of resistance and resilience.

Finally, the use of digital tools must be leveraged for "digital decolonization." Students should be encouraged to explore and contribute to alternative historical narratives through blogs, podcasts, YouTube channels, and social media platforms. These digital spaces offer a powerful opportunity to counter mainstream silences and build inclusive, critical, and student-driven historiography. Together, these steps can radically transform how history is taught and understood-making it more inclusive, locally rooted, and socially just.

Conclusion

This research underscores the pressing need to decolonize history education in India, particularly in culturally rich yet underrepresented regions like Karnataka. The findings clearly reveal that current history curricula overwhelmingly prioritize colonial rulers, elite nationalists, and dominant caste narratives while marginalizing the stories of local heroes, tribal resistance leaders, Dalit voices, and women revolutionaries. Such exclusions not only distort historical understanding but also alienate students from their own heritage and identities.

However, the study also offers hope. When students are introduced to inclusive, regionally grounded, and critically framed content-such as folk epics, Dalit autobiographies, and oral histories-they become more engaged, reflective, and capable of questioning dominant narratives. Teachers, too, play a transformative role when trained to bring intersectional and decolonial approaches into their classrooms. Exposure to community knowledge systems, regional literature, and cultural traditions fosters a deeper and more authentic engagement with history.

Ultimately, decolonizing history is not just about curriculum change-it is about reimagining knowledge itself. By centering marginalized voices and honoring multiple ways of knowing, education can become a tool for social justice, identity recovery, and civic empowerment. A more inclusive and

context-sensitive historical narrative will not only enrich students' understanding of the past but also equip them to build a more equitable and diverse future.

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