

DECOLONISING THE INDIAN MIND: REVIVING THE ARGUMENTATIVE TRADITION

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Abstract

India has long been celebrated as a land of intellectual vigour, diverse philosophies, and dialogical traditions. India's past was not built merely upon religious dogma or authoritarian hierarchy but on its deeply entrenched argumentative tradition. It was this spirit of reason, debate, and inquiry that enabled Indian civilisations to make monumental contributions to science, mathematics, governance, and culture. For centuries, India was one of the wealthiest and most advanced regions in the world, often accounting for nearly a quarter of the global GDP and producing innovations in textiles, metallurgy, and philosophy that shaped human progress.

Nonetheless, this golden intellectual tradition declined during the imperial era. Colonial rule drained India's material resources and eroded its intellectual vitality by enforcing what can be called “mental slavery”. The subjugation of minds through imposed loyalty, blind obedience, and suppression of dissent weakened critical faculties that had once flourished in ancient universities like Takshashila and Nalanda. Today, as India aspires to reclaim its place as a global power, one crucial question remains: how can critical thinking be re-embedded into the fabric of Indian education and society? The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognises the importance of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving as essential twenty-first-century skills. However, undertones emphasising compliance and loyalty to authority, echoing throughout the wider society, threaten to undermine its transformative potential. If India truly wishes to harness its demographic dividend, it must cultivate independent, analytical, and creative minds rather than docile followers. This paper argues that critical thinking is not only India's historical strength but also its future necessity.

Keywords: Argumentative Tradition, National Education Policy (NEP), Critical Thinking, Civilisational Imperative

1. Introduction

India has long been celebrated as a land of intellectual vigour, diverse philosophies, and dialogical traditions. India's past was not built merely upon religious dogma or authoritarian hierarchy but on its deeply entrenched argumentative tradition. It was this spirit of reason, debate, and inquiry that enabled Indian civilisations to make monumental contributions to science, mathematics, governance, and culture. For centuries, India was one of the wealthiest and most advanced regions in the world, often accounting for nearly a quarter of the global GDP and producing innovations in textiles, metallurgy, and philosophy that shaped human

progress.

2. India's Argumentative Tradition

India's civilisational history is characterised by vigorous intellectual exchanges. Not one but several schools of thought thrived in India from the 1st millennium BCE to the 1st millennium CE, which included six astika schools of thought in Hinduism, viz. Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta. All these orthodox schools accepted the Vedas as an authentic source of knowledge. Four non-Hindu schools of thought – Buddhism, Jainism, Charvaka, and Ajivika – also developed simultaneously and are known as nastika philosophies because they rejected

the Vedas. All these diverse schools matured through mutual criticism of each other. From the dialogues of the Upanishads to the debates between Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu scholars, argumentation was considered a method of refining truth.

Competitive schools institutionalised robust traditions of philosophical debates, testing their ideas of intellectual discourse against each other. This openness to debate nurtured both diversity and intellectual growth. Shastrartha was a type of popular, intellectual debate where people vied with each other for winning by showing their knowledge of the ancient scriptures and took pride in their debating skills. In gurukulas, students were made to practice debates among themselves. Scholars too participated in these debates on religious and philosophical themes to prove their point. Discourses engage sceptics and rival thinkers rather than demand blind faith. The dramatic Shastrartha of Shankaracharya and Mandan Mishra is well described in literature. Two texts, the Charak Samhita and the Nyaysutras, elaborately discuss the theory of debate. Three types of debates were recognised: the Vada-katha (healthy discussions which targeted the truth, between the Guru and Shishya, or followers of the same school), the Jalpa-katha (where two contradictory interpretations contested with each other, between the followers of different schools) and the Vitanda-katha (which attacked the other views without establishing their own view). These debate types are further categorised into subtypes. There are classifications of the respondents and the assembly gatherings. Items whose knowledge was indispensable for a successful debate are meticulously listed (Vidyabhushana, 1920). All this evidence points to the traditions of a healthy society where putting forth your argument was not considered uncivil or anti-social; rather, it was a matter of pride.

Legacies of these robust ancient traditions can be traced until mediaeval times when bhakti poets often thrived on questioning social hierarchies and orthodoxy. Scientific reasoning and logical questioning are well established in the teachings of Kabir, Guru Nanak Dev, and Mirabai, who refused to let go of common sense

and agential thinking while simultaneously leading movements of love and empathy. The novel and indigenous approach of dissent and resistance, tempered with compassion, practiced by these mediaeval saints is unique and quite different from the dry, self-centred logic framed by the western rationalist approach. This culture of argument not only enriched India's philosophical heritage but also fostered pluralism and tolerance, inspiring the society to embed critical thinking in simple acts of everyday life through dialogue, debate, and questioning.

This argumentative tradition was not only limited to the intellectual elite or spiritual aspirants but also permeated into the alleys of rural India too, as evidenced by folk traditions of debates found all over India till recently. 'Kobir Lodai' in Bengal was a poetic duel where two folk poets engaged in witty but metaphorical exchanges before large village audiences. The competition tested philosophical, social, and religious knowledge, a sense of humour, memory, and the ability to speak in metaphorical language. 'Burra Katha', prevalent in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, was a narrative-cum-debate performance where performers argued and critiqued social, moral and political issues, often provoking thought. Traditions of 'Harikatha' or 'Kirtan' in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu sharpened critical thinking on themes of dharma, ethics, and social conduct through arguments. Interactive debates challenging the actors were enacted through the 'Bhavai' or 'Swang' traditions of Gujarat and Haryana. These traditions point to the vigorous mechanism of Indian society, through which critical thinking was effortlessly inculcated in communities to ensure that argumentation and critical reasoning were not confined to scholars but were lived practices among common people.

Consequently, knowledge in the Indian society became more and more refined, pure and crystallised, with all remnants of irrelevance, falsehood or faulty notions filtered out through continuous critique, and India became not merely a passive land of spirituality but also a powerhouse of economic and intellectual activity. For nearly two millennia, India led the world in trade,

science, and art. Textiles from Bengal, steel from South India, and mathematical breakthroughs such as the concept of zero positioned India as a global leader. Sen (2005) observes that ‘epistemological departures from orthodoxy provided methodological help for the cultivation of observational science.’ Dalrymple (2024) too emphasises that it was India’s intellectual and creative richness, fuelled by critical engagement, that made it thrive.

Thus, we can safely conclude that India's global leadership directly stemmed from its argumentative tradition and its willingness to value inquiry over conformity.

3. Colonial Erosion of Critical Thinking (CT)

Colonial powers strategised that controlling bodies was not enough; controlling minds was essential. Education under the British, as envisioned by Thomas Macaulay’s Minute on Education (1835), deliberately sought to produce a class of Indians who were “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” This was intellectual colonisation at its peak.

Instead of nurturing creativity or inquiry, colonial education emphasised rote learning and memorisation and trained clerks and administrators to serve imperial bureaucracy. It discouraged questioning of authority or colonial narratives. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986) argues in another context, colonial education systematically alienates people from their heritage and conditions them for obedience. India’s critical faculties suffered the same fate. It was not that the Indian society could not recognise the treachery, but the systematic breakdown of all stable systems and traditions led to deep inferiority and feelings of inadequacy in our own culture. The Calcutta University, established in 1857, was called ‘Goldighir Golamkhana’ by the locals, which meant ‘the slave house by the round lake’, a biting criticism that the university was producing clerks and obedient servants of the British rather than original thinkers. Its focus on a rigid exam system, rote memorisation, and blind dependence on colonial values did not encourage free, critical thought. The society saw it as a tool of mental subjugation, which was

perhaps more damaging than material exploitation because it curtailed India’s innate ability to question, innovate, and challenge.

4. Loss of Indigenous Intellectual Spaces

Under colonialism, the legacy of ancient centres like Nalanda and India’s indigenous intellectual traditions – Ayurveda, yoga, knowledge of metallurgy, maritime, textiles, astronomy, mathematics, and chemistry – which once embodied global standards of inquiry and debate were sidelined, replaced with imported systems designed for administrative efficiency rather than intellectual flourishing. As Varma (2005) points out, the erosion of cultural confidence created a dependency syndrome where Indians internalised subservience, which took them three hundred long years to throw away the yoke of an imperial master. Regrettably, even after achieving political freedom, the youth's robust

5. Critical thinking training did not resurface.

Critical Thinking for a Global Power future.

Countries prosper when their people do more than recall facts. They must create knowledge, new products and better processes and make reasoned decisions in uncertain contexts – the preconditions for discovery and responsible innovation. Global bodies consistently situate CT at the heart of quality education and human capital formation, emphasising its role in higher-order cognition, judgement and lifelong learning (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). The World Bank’s Human Capital Framework shows that education quality – particularly advanced cognitive skills – drives worker productivity and national income. An economy that upgrades from routine to non-routine cognitive tasks realises higher value-added growth. CT is thus not only a soft skill; it is core to the productive capacity of the future workforce and to a resilient, innovation-led growth path (World Bank, 2018).

India has steadily improved in the Global Innovation Index (GII) and features multiple science and technology clusters, reflecting growing innovation capabilities. To keep climbing, the system must deepen inputs that feed innovation, research quality, problem-solving and entrepreneurship – precisely the

competencies CT nurtures (World Intellectual Property Organisation, 2024).

CT in practice is the ability to analyse arguments, evaluate evidence, infer logically, synthesise across disciplines and decide under uncertainty. In colleges and universities it translates to framing researchable questions, designing methods and interrogating data; critiquing literature and building logically consistent arguments; transferring knowledge across domains; and making reflective judgements. Bouckaert, M. & Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2023) stress that CT and creativity can be explicitly taught, learnt and assessed, not nearly 'hoped for'. Indian regulatory and quality frameworks already encode CT as a graduate attribute. UGC's Learning Outcomes Based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) (University Grants Commission, 2018) and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council's assessment manuals (NAAC, n.d.) reference critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving and research aptitude as desired outcomes.

6. The Demographic Dividend and Its Challenges

India today has the world's largest youth population. By 2030, it is expected that over 50% of Indians will be under 30. This demographic dividend offers immense potential for innovation, economic growth, and cultural leadership. However, if young minds are trained merely to obey and comply, the dividend may turn into a liability. As UNESCO (2015) stresses, critical thinking is a core competency for 21st-century citizens, necessary for navigating complex global challenges. Without CT, workforce skills will remain outdated in the face of automation, and democratic institutions may weaken due to uncritical compliance. Innovation will stagnate, preventing India from becoming a true knowledge economy.

7. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: An Overview of Its Promises

It is heartening to note that the concept of critical thinking has been discussed at least ten times in the National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020), right in the introduction and as fundamental principles. Going beyond the generic discussion, it specifically recognises that our

routine education discourages thinking and there is no scope for critical inquiry, as compliance is preferred over healthy doubt. The policy also talks about creating physical infrastructure and discussion spaces in educational institutes to promote CT. NEP 2020 is thus ambitious and forward-looking in highlighting creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and inquiry-driven learning as fundamental to modern education, and its emphasis on multidisciplinary studies and flexible curricula resonates with India's historical argumentative tradition. It explicitly calls for a decisive shift from rote learning to critical thinking across all levels of education, thus taking the right step towards the true decolonising of the country.

8. The Concern

However, concerns arise in the undue emphasis on compliance, loyalty, and uniformity practised in educational institutions by the still-colonised minds of academic administrators and academicians themselves who fail to see the significance of a critical mind. Centralised control of curricula may suppress regional diversity and alternative perspectives. Stress on moral values, while important, risks turning into ideological conformity if not balanced with openness to questioning. Calls for loyalty can be learnt as unthinking compliance, where students will not learn how to practise legitimate dissent, which is itself a vital form of critical engagement. The legacy of argumentative tradition – where citizens could raise healthy doubts, argue it out and thus contribute to the development of a near-perfect knowledge society – is almost lost. As Nussbaum (2010) argues, education for democracy must prepare citizens who can question, not just comply. A system that prioritises obedience over inquiry is a "recipe for disaster". It is obvious that by not equipping our students with the most significant skill of thinking, the educational ecosystem is taking a grave risk and moving towards a society which will be colonised once again, if not territorially, then intellectually. As citizens lose the capacity to think sharply and value the thinking process called 'chintan', reflection gets erased from the community, and in its stead materialism, consumerism, crime, violence and all non-thinking tendencies accumulate. The demography of young people who have youth, power, vigour and energy on their side but have no thinking competency will surely be a 'recipe for disaster'.

9. Critical Thinking as a Civilisational Imperative

Reviving critical thinking in India is not just a pedagogical necessity but a civilisational responsibility. Historically, India's greatness rested on its ability to foster debate and accommodate dissent. To reclaim global leadership, India must encourage inquiry-based pedagogy, moving away from rote learning to problem-solving and experiential learning. Academic freedom should be protected, and universities should be spaces where diverse ideas can be debated without fear. It is indispensable to cultivate cultural confidence and reconnect students with India's argumentative traditions, from Shastrartha to Buddhist councils to the Bhakti tradition of questioning orthodoxy. Citizens must be trained to engage critically with governance, media, and technology, thus promoting civic reasoning. Only by embedding critical thinking into every citizen's education and life can India harness its demographic dividend and aspire to global leadership once again. India's history reveals that a thriving argumentative tradition laid the foundation for its intellectual leadership and global prominence. Colonialism disrupted this tradition, replacing critical thought with subjugation and compliance. Today, as India seeks to become a world power, it cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of obedience-driven education. While NEP 2020 acknowledges the importance of critical thinking, emphasis on compliance in educational systems risks undermining its goals. The future of India depends on whether it can revive its civilisational heritage of inquiry and debate. To harness its demographic dividend, India must produce thinkers, innovators, and leaders who dare to question and create, not just conform and obey. In doing so, India will not only reclaim its past glory but also chart a path toward a more enlightened, prosperous, and democratic future.

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