
Re-Reading Swami and Friends in the Twenty First Century: Tracing Colonial, Post-Colonial and Independent Phases of Education in India (1835-2020)

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Abstract

The present paper analyses the notion of colonial education represented by R.K. Narayan in his novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) and engages in a retrospective literary delineation of the education policies of India, locating three key moments in the trajectory of education in India- the English Education Policy of 1835, the National Policy on Education of 1986 and the National Education Policy of 2020, to demarcate three crucial phases- colonial, post-colonial and independent India's approach to education. Subsequently, based on this critical analysis, the paper discusses the significance of re-reading the novel, and attempts to understand the basis for its enduring relevance in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: education, India, pedagogy, policy, post-colonial

Introduction

Representation of the colonial education system in India has always constituted a significant vantage point into the critical analysis of almost all of R.K. Narayan's novels, especially with respect to the trilogy of novels- *Swami and Friends* (1935), *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The English Teacher* (1945). However, among these, his first novel, *Swami and Friends* has been the site of most critical enquiries due to its unique position within the discourse of children's education. Narrated in third person in a semi-detached tone, the novel which is known for its simple language and astute representation of the child's psyche, has often been looked at entirely in terms of Swami's encounters with colonial education, first at Albert Mission School and then at Board High School.

As a work of literary fiction, which dwells on the child's educational experience and development, the novel has been at the centre of several critical interventions, being analyzed for its humorous narration, representation of childhood and child's psyche, its engagement with the Gandhian view on education as well as the notion of colonial education. However, a holistic reading of the novel which places its critical analysis within the continuum of the evolving educational landscape in India in an attempt to reflect upon its significance within the discourse of literature as well as education and discuss its enduring relevance in the twenty first century has not yet been attempted, especially with regard to the changes in education policies. Therefore, to address this lacuna in the existing critical discourse surrounding the text, the present paper undertakes a critical analyses of *Swami and Friends* (1935), placing it within the rubric of key policy changes in education as it traces the evolving notion of education from 1835 to 2020.

While there have been several key policy decisions in Indian education, in the interest of establishing a relatively detailed critical analysis, the present paper will extrapolate the critical reading of the text only in terms of three key policy changes, the English Education Act of 1835, the National Policy on Education of 1986 and the National Education Policy of 2020, which this paper argues, represent three phases in the trajectory of education in India- the colonial, the post-colonial, and the independent phase respectively.

Education in India

In order to situate the analysis of the text within the context of education in India, it first becomes necessary to discuss the notions of Indian education and delineate significant shifts in its essential meanings over time, as it engaged with different socio-political moments in history.

Ancient and Middle Ages

Learning has always constituted a vital part of the Indian culture, initially being imparted through primarily verbal modes of learning and meditation in the Vedic period (Sharma and Sharma, 6). The knowledge generated and imbibed thus, was then passed on to the subsequent generations through the Aranyakas, Upanishads, Shastras, Puranas and various Sutras (collection of aphorisms), all of which were eventually put into writing, giving rise to a vast corpus of knowledge spanning the discourses of philosophy, political science, metallurgy, botany, medical science, religion, literature, linguistics, economics, history, and mathematics.

Indian view of education, however, was not merely based on ideation and abstract concepts, but involved a unique blend of conceptual knowledge, vocational training as well as an emphasis on the ethical and moral employment of these skills. The gurukuls and institutes of India therefore, as exemplified by the universities at Takshila and Nalanda emerged as prominent centres of learning and innovation, with students travelling from across nations to receive education (Blackwell, 8). This rich pedagogic tradition continued to flourish for more than a millennium and with Sanskrit emerging as the lingua franca of much of Asia, this socio-cultural lineage gave rise to the 'Indosphere', making its way to present day Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia as well as China (Darymple, 3).

However, with the advent of Islamic forces, and the emergence of Islamic sultanates in twelfth and thirteenth century India, there was a shift in the language of governance and thus the lingua franca of the subcontinent to Persian. This socio-linguistic shift subsequently affected the system of education as well and pre-Mughal emperors began to facilitate the favour of Islamic institutions (Sen, 22). Subsequently, the fabric of Indian education continued to change rapidly, patched by the religio-political agendas of various invasive forces.

The Colonial Advent

The discourse on education within India changed yet again with the colonial encounter, as the European schooling system began to be propagated. Introduced as early as 1542 by Jesuits in Goa, the colonizer's system of education soon began taking its roots within the Indian subcontinent and soon the colonial system of education became the dominant institutionalized way of learning in India (About-us – Government Printing Press & Stationery, Govt of Goa, India). Among the several policies enacted primarily by the British East India Company in order to change the education system in India, Macauley's Minute of 1835 is arguably the most significant one with respect to the literary and socio-cultural discourse within India. The English Education Act of 1835, defended by Macauley, defined the colonial stance on education in India by establishing a western curriculum with English as the sole medium of instruction, and inaugurated what the present paper understands

as the institutionalized colonial phase of education in India. Following this, the ‘brown babus’ or ‘Mimic Men’ as V.S. Naipaul calls them, soon began to abandon their language and culture to prove themselves worthy of the lucrative government jobs in colonial India. Thus, the colonial education system and socio-linguistic discourse became doubly strengthened both at the level of policy as well as the level of willing subjects.

Post Independence

The colonial education system continued for more than a century and it was only after independence in 1947, that the government of India sought to create uniformity amongst the educational institutions of India, heralding the post-colonial phase of education in India. The term post-colonial is used instead of independent here as the present paper argues that despite the introduction of two major education policies in 1968 and 1986, which foregrounded the three language formula and rural universities respectively, policy changes reflected more of an attempt to adapt to the western view of education, subconsciously looking to the former colonial masters as the ideal to aspire to rather than looking back towards its ancient tradition of learning. Thus, the NPE of 1986, included the idea of ‘human resource’, based on the emerging western discourse of capitalism inaugurating an era which focused more on students and individuals as ‘resources’, processing information instead of creative individuals capable of generating knowledge.

It was only with the National Education Policy of 2020, and its turn back to our roots, that a new phase of educational independence, stemming from our ancient Indian heritage of knowledge and learning was established. With its emphatic focus on Indian Knowledge Systems, even while it attempts to integrate our indigenous ways of learning into the international institutional structures, the NEP 2020 brings back a holistic approach to education and to life by combining ideation, vocational training and value-based learning, leading India towards a full circle moment with its glorious past. Even though a lot remains to be done, the NEP 2020 has emerged as a definite step in the right direction.

Re-reading *Swami and Friends* in the twenty-first century, and juxtaposing it with this journey that the education system in India has led itself and its students through offers the possibility of reflecting upon the subsequent developments in education within India, following its independence from colonial rule in an attempt to delineate the educational development and decolonization, in addition to a close critical analysis of the text. While India has witnessed several key education policy decisions both in its colonial past as well as its independent past and present between the 1835 English Education Policy and the NEP 2020, including the education policies of 1968, 1986 and 1992, the present paper will limit itself to a discussion of only three significant demarcations within this long history- the colonial education policy of 1835, the national policy on education of 1986 and the national education policy of 2020, in its retrospective reflections on *Swami and Friends* (1935) as a novel representing children’s education and development in India.

Critical Analysis

Swami and Friends (1935) by R. K. Narayan is an Indian novel set in Malgudi, a fictional town in South India which engages in an innocently biting and humorous critique of the colonial education system. Narrated in third person, the text traces the experiences of Swaminathan, as he navigates through the First Form at schools which offer little intellectual stimulus to his distracted and alienated mind, and only serve to change and shape him in their image.

Swami's Education and the Colonial Paradigm

The book starts with Swami dreading school after the 'delicious freedom' of Saturday and Sunday, foregrounding a recurring pattern of Swami's association of negative emotions like reluctance, anxiety and fear with school (Narayan, 1). Seeing it as a burden which traps his imaginative mind in the mundane and mechanical routine of repetitive homework, excessive focus on memorization rather than understanding and Christian religious teaching which constantly critiques Swami's faith, Swami often zones out of classes and takes little to no interest in the intellectual discourse within Albert Mission School.

As the narrative progresses we are introduced to other members of the school, 'fire-eyed' Vedanayam, the arithmetic teacher, zealous Ebenezar, the teacher of scriptures, the scarcely audible nameless Tamil Pundit with almost no power either over the students or over the functioning of the school and D. Pillai the most beloved teacher who eschews traditional pedagogy for dramatic narrations of historical events and is well liked by all students (Narayan, 2-5). Even within these seemingly innocent descriptions of a child's account of school, it is possible to observe the colonial politics that was inherent in the functioning of schools like the Albert Mission School in Malgudi. It is only the teachers who represent Western subjects and punitive teaching methods like Vedanayagam and Ebenezar who are shown to have actual authority within the school. The Indian tongue which finds representation in the Tamil Pundit, remains inaudible and powerless within the walls of the school, much like the systematic sidelining of all indigenous disciplines, languages and socio-cultural discourses within the colonial regime.

In this context then, it is interesting to note that the only exception to this power dynamic is D. Pillai, the history teacher. Known for regaling his students with numerous historical exploits of figures who conformed to no canon of education, D. Pillai can be seen as a representative of an alternative mode of teaching. This becomes especially significant as he teaches history, a discipline rooted in the past, yet the methods of learning that he presents to his students are not only reminiscent of the ancient Indian system of expansive, holistic education imbued with kindness but could also be seen as Narayan's vision of the future of education in independent India which ensures expansive learning based on humane teacher-student relationship rather than the fear of a cane.

Across stories of small childhood pleasures like acquiring and racing a hoop, incredulous investment in coachman's son's scheme to alchemically double one's money, and numerous adventures and fights with Mani, Rajam, Somu and Samuel ('The Pea'), Swaminathan finally approaches the school examinations. Narayan uses this opportunity to reflect upon the multifaceted, sometimes irrational ways that the students prepare for the exams. Swami proceeds mostly through fear of failure and of his dad's scolding. Somu becomes business like and Rajam focuses on taking notes and not socializing with anyone, even Mani appears worried, only to be pacified after his bribe of fresh brinjals yields a generic answer from the school peon (Narayan, 60). These changes exemplify the anxiety and fear caused the examinations which are an integral part of the repressive colonial education system.

R.K. Narayan extends this critique of the colonial education system by mocking the question paper through Swaminathan's questioning of the probability of the Brahmin-tiger story and his inability to relate to it. He further ridicules the system's pedagogy by mentioning that Swami hadn't thought that the story contained a moral but was forced to think of it due to the question (Narayan, 69). The incident where Swami's father asks him a problem on mangoes but Swami can only wonder if the mangoes were ripe or not add to Narayan's representation of the child's imagination not being engaged within the current system of education.

School is also represented as having a social influence on Swami. He is fascinated by Rajam and tries to emulate him. He feels embarrassed to tell the Principal that he was part of the protest as he is afraid of Rajam's judgement and of losing his friendship. Rajam can be read as a representation of the British colonizers to Swami's India and Swami's fascination by and inferiority through Rajam's eyes represents the 'doubleness' in

the colonized. Further Rajam is shown bullying his cook, which makes Swami marvel at his authority and may have influenced him to bully the Karuppan. Thus the education system influences every child not just academically but also shapes his thoughts and identity.

The school as an institution represents the authority of the colonizers and is read as a means of fulfilling Macaulay's dream of "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect". The emphasis on rote learning and shunning of practical or imaginative answers as illustrated in the novel when Swami is asked to describe the climate of India, critiques the colonial education system. Also the way children are made to give reasons for their absence from school on the day of protest and if their explanations seem unsatisfactory they are caned by the Principal, further highlights the violence in such institutions (Narayan, 122-123). These institutions meant to be concerned with teaching and knowledge thus emerge as centres of power under the colonial government.

The novel finally takes a dark turn and shows Swami unable to cope with such an oppressive system coupled with a strict father. Swami runs away to Memphis forests which seem to offer him an escape from his monotonous, rigid life (Narayan, 180). He is pushed to run away due to his headmaster who he is terribly afraid of and this is a direct critique of the ways of the colonial education system. The colonial education system is thus shown to be one which scares a child to such an extent that he sees no other option but to run away. This concludes Narayan's critique of the colonial education system from the perspective of Swaminathan. It represents the helplessness and alienation of a child in a system meant to subdue imagination through a mindless routine implemented with violence, a discourse influenced almost entirely by Macauley's vision of education in India. Thus, Swaminathan's experiences with education, first at Albert Mission School and then at Board School, can be seen as a representational critique of the English Education Policy of 1835 and the numerous colonial policies that followed it.

W.T. Swaminathan and the Colonial-Indigenous Duality

Another perspective on education in the novel is indirectly represented through Swaminathan's interactions with his father. W.T. Swaminathan is shown to be extremely strict in matters of education, almost bringing his son to tears over a math problem. While he has Swami's best interests at heart, Swaminathan is often shown to be afraid of him, often acting as though he is studying when his father is at home.

One of the telling incidents which involve Swaminathan and his father occurs when the latter sets the former a sum on simple proportions, "Rama has ten mangoes with which he wants to earn fifteen annas. Krishna only wants four mangoes. How much will Krishna have to pay?" (Narayan 1935 p.100). However, before Swami can get into the calculative aspect of the question, his mind wanders off, wishing that he could find out whether the mangoes in question are ripe or not, eventually leading him to the conclusion that he could not possibly tell what price Krishna would pay as that would be his decision to make. While all of these questions seem amusing to the reader, and earn Swami a rough scolding and ear twist from his father, they reflect Swami's ability to engage in critical thinking, rather than mechanical calculation.

In this context, then Mr Srinivasan's behaviour, while rooted in a place of fatherly affection, appears to be similar to the tenets of the National Policy on Education 1986. Much like the policy which covertly furthers creation of human 'resources' rather than critical thinkers, Swaminathan's father only seems to be interested in the numeral which must be arrived at through calculation, rather than the thought behind it.

Grandma and the Indigenous Paradigm

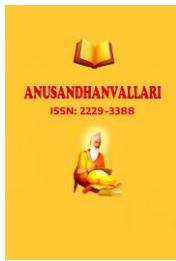
The third perspective on education represented in the novel resides in the character of Swaminathan's grandmother, who despite being a minor character is never truly removed from the text's narrative. Located in a room containing a medley of spices like cardamom, cloves and areca nuts, reading stories of Harishchandra (Narayan, 22-23), Swami's grandmother is associated with a sense of comfortable belonging in her irrevocable Indian-ness. While fond of telling wonderful tales himself, Swaminathan also loves listening to his grandmother's stories before going to bed. Her narratives, which often contain themes of heroic victory and moral lessons, can be seen as an extension of the informal way of learning through oral methods as was prevalent in ancient India, which prioritized a feeling of belonging both via living in the gurukuls and through the use of the mother tongue. This mode of education, as embodied by Swaminathan's grandmother thus, can be interpreted as the initiatives undertaken by the National Education Policy of 2020 which is focused on the inclusion of mother tongue as the medium of instruction while also incorporating traditional toys to help the students feel right at home.

However, in this context, it is also important to note that Swaminathan is frequently shown to be embarrassed by his grandmother, who resides in an "ill-ventilated passage between the front hall and the drawing room" (Narayan 1935 p.22). Her location in the house is also significant with respect to the current analysis. Relegated to the back of the house, her treatment is reminiscent of the place that indigenous knowledge systems had been pushed back to following the advent of colonizing forces. A caveat in Swami's behaviour towards his grandma, however, is that even though he is embarrassed by her, it is usually in her room that he truly finds comfort and feels safe to be himself. This, perhaps is the change that the NEP 2020 has the potential to bring about, to make us comfortable in our indigenous identity, while embracing our roots with pride.

The tensions between the colonial regime and indigenous identity come to head towards the end of the novel when Swaminathan is overwhelmed by the intense pressure of trying fitting in without truly belonging and runs away to the Memphis forest. On his return, he is left with no other choice but to re-join Board School, whose policies are aligned with the colonial regime. However, there is a change in his personal life, as Rajam leaves the town without either taking Swami's address or leaving him his own contact information, and Swami's connection with Rajam is severed, possibly forever (Narayan, 212). It is this moment of partial severance with the colonial regime and the possibilities of future that Narayan leaves open and uncertain, that may be seen as being answered by the National Education Policy of 2020. Bringing back the focus on ancient Indian systems of learning, aiming to establish India as the 'Vishwa Guru' once again, the National Education Policy of 2020 could be seen as a simultaneous embodiment of both Swami's grandmother as well future Swaminathan.

Conclusion

R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935), read from the framework of the twenty first century understanding of education in India, allows for the identification of the colonial, post-colonial and truly independent phases of the Indian education system within the critical analysis of the text, especially as embodied by the characters of Rajam, Swaminathan and Swami's grandmother. A critical re-reading of the text in conjunction with the trajectory of education policies in India thus, reveals a new possibility of meaning making, especially with respect to its position as a text located at the intersection of the discourses of literature and education, opening up new vistas for critical literary interventions into the novel as a way of reflecting upon the essence of education in India and positing the possibilities for future change.



Anusandhanvallari

Vol 2025, No.1

September 2025

ISSN 2229-3388

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