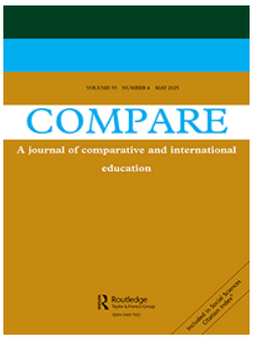

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A different 'foundational' learning: the basic education experiment in post-colonial India

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ABSTRACT

Recent efforts to improve learning in low- and middle-income countries have prioritised basic reading and arithmetic skills as foundational to learning. However, such a paradigm has been critiqued for overlooking contextual dimensions and models of learning. This paper highlights the case of Basic education in India – a Gandhian learning model to decolonise schooling after the British colonial rule. It deprioritized formal reading and arithmetic for children and instead integrated subject areas around manual activities. Through a historical analysis, this paper examines the conception, implementation, and subsequent failure of this model. In doing so, it argues that an understanding of 'basic' in learning is not static, but varies depending on prevalent theories about learning and the socio-economic priorities at a given context or time. Additionally, this paper cautions against considering any local learning models in LMICs as contextually relevant and empowering, given the plurality of contexts, populations, and power relations.

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Quality of education; history of education policies; education policy and planning; India; historical methods

Introduction

India's latest National Education Policy declared the attainment of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) for children by 2026–27 as an 'urgent national mission' (MoHRD Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020, 8). This prioritisation of FLN – the ability to read simple texts or perform basic arithmetic operations – in India is not an isolated development but entwined with a similar impetus within the global education sector to address a *global learning crisis* (for e.g. World Bank 2019; Beeharry 2021). This dominant paradigm equates educational quality with measurable indicators like reading and arithmetic skills (Barrett 2011); while cautioning against *too ambitious* curricula and teaching in LMICs, it emphasises the need to get the *basics* right first (e.g. Pritchett and Beatty 2012). As such, recent conversations about learning in LMICs have remained decontextualised and restricted to being about basic reading and arithmetic (R. J. Alexander 2015) – often in service of standardisation and comparability.

The framing of the global learning crisis has been critiqued not only for its prioritisation of narrow indicators of learning but also for its silence on how histories of

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colonialism, racism, and white supremacy have sustained educational inequalities in LMICs (Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2020). Silova (2018) argues that the underlying colonial logics of the learning crisis perpetuate hierarchies of knowledge and expertise and holds up practices vetted by Western experts as 'solutions' (see also, Tikly 2011). The crisis narrative perpetuates a deficit understanding of education in LMICs, where a history of inefficiency, bad planning, and misguided priorities is assumed to have disabled the possibility of innovative educational approaches. Challenging these dominant narratives and power relations requires pointing out practices, epistemologies, and methodologies that have been denied relevance despite being grounded in the realities of LMICs (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012; Khoja-Moolji 2017; Santos 2012; Tikly 2011).

Motivated by this perspective, in this paper, I focus on Basic education[1] – an approach conceived by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and used experimentally as the core approach in Indian schools following the end of British colonial rule in 1947. In tracing Basic education's case, this historical analysis examines how the shifting social and political realities of India during the mid-20th century enabled and subsequently disabled a locally developed learning model. Considering the enhancement of children's understanding of the world around them through manual work as *basic* or *foundational*, this model integrated subjects with contextually relevant activities and discouraged teaching of reading, arithmetic, and writing in early years of schooling. It was conceived to achieve holistic child development while simultaneously driving a social reform agenda by dignifying manual labour.

I use the case of Basic education in India as an illustration of possibility – of a locally developed, non-standardised, and progressive learning model in an LMIC. However, I also use it as a cautionary example by showing how the model was misaligned with national priorities as well as the realities of the marginalised populations it sought to empower. In doing so, I argue that what is understood as *basic* or fundamental to learning, is not a rigid notion, but significantly reliant on the social, political, and economic purposes of schooling in a given context or at a given time. Additionally, I raise new questions about simplistically considering *local* models of learning as contextually relevant and empowering for marginalised populations. As such, I challenge the notion of a singular *local* for diverse LMIC contexts like India. Following a brief overview and methodological notes, I describe the core tenets of Basic education, its implementation, and its shortcomings, and conclude by discussing it in the light of current paradigms in LMICs.

Perspectives on learning in LMICs

Recent claims argue that even though most children in LMICs are now enrolled in school, they are not learning (Pritchett 2013; World Bank 2019). This situation – dubbed as a global learning crisis – is attributed to a variety of reasons, such as a rapid increase in enrolment without improvements in quality, the lack of motivation and apathy among teachers (Pritchett 2013), ambitious curricula directed towards high-achieving students (Pritchett and Beatty 2012), and systemic focus on inputs that have little effects on learning (Kremer, Brannen, and Glennerster 2013), among other things. The extent of the learning crisis in LMICs is now estimated using learning outcomes in simple reading and arithmetic skills, or foundational literacy and

numeracy (FLN). Relatedly, transnational institutions, philanthropies, private actors, and governments across LMICs have increasingly mobilised themselves towards achieving FLN goals, with a prioritised focus on *basics* becoming an increasingly accepted paradigm in elementary education (Beeharry 2021; Evans and Hares 2021). Within this paradigm, the mastery of basic reading and arithmetic skills is considered a pre-requisite or foundational to any advanced learning (Belafi, Hwa, and Kaffenberger 2020).

Yet, many have critiqued such paradigms for various reasons. The framing of the global learning crisis around a deficit of basic reading and arithmetic has been criticised for its failure to engage and reckon with the role of colonialism and racism in enabling low learning levels in LMICs (Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2020; Silova 2018; Tikly 2011). A narrow emphasis on literacy and numeracy scores as indicators of learning also overlooks the heterogeneity of contexts, social inequities that affect learning, and other non-measurable aspects (Barrett 2011; Tikly 2011). Such an approach – focused on easily measurable aspects – is not only detached from the complexity of teaching and learning but also the cultural ecology in which those happen (R. Alexander 2008, 2015). Additionally, this dominant paradigm of learning assumes several colonial by-products, like rote learning or test-centred teaching, as inherent characteristics of school systems of LMICs. In doing so, they actively deny relevance to local knowledge possibilities and erase the histories of local learning models (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012; Khoja-Moolji 2017; Santos 2012). Basic education in India is an example of the latter; as such, this paper illustrates the case of a locally developed learning paradigm in an LMIC.

At the same time, this paper also challenges a rigid notion of what is understood as *basic* in education. Colloquial usage of *basic* in relation to learning has precipitated around the abilities to read simple texts and perform arithmetic calculations. This popular understanding has reinforced and has been in turn reinforced by discourses in a dominant paradigm of learning focused on FLN; which build on a commonsensical primacy of reading and arithmetic in elementary schooling. Yet, this paradigm overlooks the contextual basis of learning and assumes foundational skills of reading and arithmetic to be universally essential and valued in all cultures (Schweisfurth 2023). As such, through the case of Basic education, this paper highlights an alternative notion of *basic*, which shows that basic or 'foundational' learning is not a fixed idea, but closely linked to philosophies about the purpose of education, as well as the sociopolitical and economic structures within which schooling is situated.

Methodological notes

This paper emerged from a larger comparative case study (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017) of recent FLN policies in India, as a part of which I examined how the notion of *foundational* or *basic* learning in Indian education policy has shifted historically. The stark contrast between Gandhian Basic education and the contemporary understanding of *basic* in Indian education prompted this current inquiry through historical research methods. As such, in this paper, I examine a particular phase in Indian education history in relation to the social, political, and economic realities of the time.

For my analysis, I collected data from primary and secondary sources relevant to the period of 1935–1970 – during which Basic education was central to mainstream schooling in India. Primary sources included three kinds of archival materials – 1) official documents, reports, speeches, and discussions that directly referred to Basic education, including Gandhi's reflections and explanations of the approach, the syllabus for Basic education schools, policy texts, and minutes of governing body meetings, 2) academic and non-academic books, chapters, and analytical articles written on Basic education by commentators and authors *outside* the government system, and 3) reportage on Basic education in mass media and leading Indian newspapers. Secondary sources included books, articles, reflections, op-eds, and research papers that cover the period of 1935–1970 in India and Indian education. My analytic approach for these materials focused on constructing a coherent timeline that traced Basic education from its conceptual origins to its eventual decline. I first reviewed all state-produced primary sources on Basic education to reconstruct its narrative from the vantage point of a policy level. I then examined the other 'non-government' primary sources and secondary sources to layer this core narrative with public opinions, tensions, and other developments.

Education in colonial India

While popular narratives have claimed that school education in India[2] under British occupation was heavily influenced by colonial power structures and goals of producing government servants for the Empire's operations in the country (Mackenzie 1959, Batra 2020), recent scholarship paints a more complex picture. The 19th century colonial education administration was not a monolithic apparatus, but instead marked by key internal conflicts about expanding access to education, determining the vernacular medium of schooling, and improving the standard of schools (Rao 2020). As such, while there was a general emphasis on filtering out 'dangerous' nationalist ideas from schools, there was no cohesive political agenda that shaped what was taught in schools and how (Gupta 2007). Tschurenev (2019) argues that while the colonial administration was indeed responsible for the provision of schooling, the actual delivery of education in schools relied more on missionaries, civil society actors, and Indian elites, and thus, was deeply shaped by their agendas and interests (see also, Ellis 2020). At the same time, schooling practices and pedagogies were not simply imposed 'top-down'; instead, as Bagchi (2014) has shown, they often circulated across cultures, geographies, and contexts to combine existing ideas with external influences. This messy formation of colonial schooling's content resulted in students encountering an unfamiliar body and form of knowledge in schools, which was detached from their realities and cultures (Kumar 2005, Sriprakash 2012). Learning by rote, which was an existing practice of knowledge accumulation in India even in precolonial times, became further entrenched as a coping mechanism for students to engage with these inaccessible models of education (Kumar 2005, Seth 2008). This influenced pedagogies in return, as they became more decontextualised and mechanical in accordance with student learning practices. As described by Gandhi, education in colonial India was largely characterised by a 'centralised examination system, drudge-like, clerk-like teachers who had little or no paedagogic [sic] creative autonomy, lack of local embedding of the teachers within the community where they taught' (Bagchi 2014, 816).

Educational institutions, over the colonial period, created an educated class of citizens who were qualified for jobs but largely apathetic towards the realities of Indian society, thus furthering the disparities between the privileged literate minority and the rural illiterate majority (Gowrie 1958). As such, when the anti-colonial nationalist movement gathered steam during the early twentieth century, several Indian leaders suggested educational reform directed towards uplifting Indian villages (Kabir 1957) – which had become economic vacuums due to imperial industrialisation and coerced agriculture. Yet, as Jodhka (2002) demonstrates, while key leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Gandhi virtually agreed on the notion of the village as a core civilisational microcosm for the Indian subcontinent, they differed widely on their visions for villages. Ambedkar saw villages as representative of the Hindu caste-based social order; he critiqued the idea of village autonomy as a reinforcement of caste oppression. While Nehru shared some of this critique of villages as socially backward places, he envisioned transforming villages into autonomous economic centres through modernist means. In contrast, Gandhi believed Indian village life was a viable alternative to the urban Western-capitalist mode of living. As such, he passionately advocated for making villages self-autonomous and socially reformed, albeit without modern industrialisation (Jodhka 2002). This disposition significantly shaped his vision for education for the masses in India.

Basic education in India

The Gandhian model of education

While the Indian National Congress, which assumed provincial offices in 1937 following imperially controlled elections, envisioned free and compulsory primary education for all, it was unsure about how to fund the same. In response, Gandhi proposed a self-supporting model of schooling – *buniyadi talim* (literally foundational or basic education), also called *nayi talim* (new education) – to address both the cultural disconnect of the colonial education model as well as the costs of universal access (Narayan 1997, Ayyar 2016). Gandhi (1951) fiercely opposed conventional learning in schools and discouraged teaching alphabets to children 'till they have had an elementary knowledge of history, geography, mental arithmetic and the art' (13), claiming that it would hamper intellectual growth. He recommended that early schooling should be based around a form of productive manual work, ideally some craftwork or artisanship, depending on the school's regional context – for e.g. weaving in cotton-growing areas, woodwork in timber-rich areas, etc. Other subject areas would be taught in relation to this activity, thus resulting in an integrated learning experience of education *through* craft and not two separate activities of education *and* craft (Ayyar 2016). Through the activities, children would create usable goods to be sold to generate capital for operating rural schools – thus, creating a self-sustaining school system. Gandhi described this model in detail:

> Look at takli [spindle] itself, for instance. The lesson of this takli will be the first lesson of our students through which they would be able to learn a substantial part of the history of cotton, Lancashire and the British empire . . . . How does this takli work? What is its utility? . . . Through this he [sic] also acquires some knowledge of mathematics. When he is asked to count the number of cotton threads on takli and he is asked to report how many

> did he spin … And the beauty is that none of this becomes even a slight burden on his mind … While playing around and singing, he keeps on turning his takli and from this itself he learns a great deal. (NCERT 2007, 4)

Inspired by this model, a Congress committee led by Zakir Husain drafted a formal report based on Gandhi's plan – the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education – outlining four key resolutions: free and compulsory schooling for 7 years, instruction in mother tongue, a self-sustaining funding plan, and the centring of craft or productive work. In response to concerns about the model's potential encouragement of child labour and the onus of funding schools for children, the self-financing aspect of basic education was touted by the committee as not the primary goal but an incidental benefit (Ayyar 2016). Critics were encouraged to accept Basic education because it was educationally sound and holistic, and not for its vocational or financial aspects (Gowrie 1958, Ramanathan 1963). For instance, at a conference in 1941, Husain emphasised that the goal of Basic education was not economic productivity, neither was it the acquisition of technical skills; instead, it was the development of a habit of mind in children related to performing tasks through planning, dedication, and rigour (Mujeeb 1972). Eventually, this model was accepted as the national model of schooling by the Congress (Biswas and Agrawal 1986).

Gandhi believed Basic education would have three benefits. First, psychologically and cognitively, it would liberate the child from purely academic instruction and give them opportunities to use their intelligence for constructive purposes. Its core tenet of learning through activity was celebrated, given a growing belief that the three Rs[3] were no longer considered as adequate for producing efficient citizens (MoE Ministry of Education 1956). Second, economically, the model would enhance the productive capacity and financial conditions of villages. Third, and perhaps the most important goal according to Gandhi, was its social contribution. Specifically, the model was to mitigate biases against certain forms of labour and bridge the gaps between intellectual and manual activities. In the caste-based Indian society[4], marginalised castes were often relegated to carry out manual labour, whereas intellectual labour or academic skills were considered to be the realm of the privileged castes. Basic education was to counter this by getting every child to participate in the same activity and dignifying certain forms of labour (Zachariah 1970). Gandhi (1937) saw this model as 'the spearhead of a silent social revolution' that would lay a social order without any 'unnatural division' (293). By 1939, 247 Basic schools had been instituted across multiple provinces in India (Holzwarth 2014). Marjorie Sykes, a British-born educator who moved to India and became actively involved with Gandhian Basic schools, recalled that on her initial visits to these Basic schools, she would see 'alert children in a simple but spotlessly clean school, who readily worked with the teacher and with one another to keep it so, and who were full of intelligent questions about the outside world' (1988, 21).

Basic education after independence

After the end of colonial rule in 1947, education was key to Prime Minister Nehru's vision for independent India's modernisation. As the government actively sought to decolonise the school system (Sarangapani 2010), it sought to conceptualise a curricular

model that suited the diversity and socio-economic reality of the country through trial and error – where experimental approaches were encouraged (Sherman 2018). Given the ready availability of Basic education as a potential model for primary schools, the Ministry of Education decided to adopt it at scale in the spirit of reconstructing education (Kumar 2005). While retaining Gandhi's original ideas, the model also drew upon popular approaches to learning from around the world, including the ideas of John Dewey and Maria Montessori (Ramanathan 1963, Sherman 2018) – reflecting the history of educational models in India being formulated through cross-contextual circulation and multi-directional exchanges (Bagchi 2014).

Basic education was proposed as a seven-year course inclusive of literacy, mathematics, social studies, general science, and arts – all centred around a productive activity. Key to this model was *correlation* – in the sense that these subject areas were to be correlated or interdependent in relation to the focused activity, to ease up students' mental lives (MoE 1956). Examples of this are well documented.

> . . .after a couple of hours of spinning, the teacher asks, say, five children the length of the thread each one has spun. Taking advantage of the different lengths each child reports, the teacher discusses the concept of average . . . On an appropriate future occasion, he will discuss conditions under which cotton grows or relate the properties of circles to the spinning wheel. (Zachariah 1970, 96)[5]

The Syllabus for Basic Schools was meant to be treated as a set of suggestions rather than a manual; teachers were not expected to follow it literally but instead see Basic education as 'teaching for life and adapt the syllabus accordingly' (MoE 1956, 4). It recommended balanced weekly timetables – where the correlation of subjects with productive work would make education more real life-oriented.

From a nationalist perspective, Basic education was seen as both a symbolic rejection of colonial models of schooling (Kabir 1957) as well as a citizen-making project that would produce self-reliant individuals (NCERT 1961). At the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) meeting in 1950, Minister of Education Abul Kalam Azad emphasised that Basic education would 'wipe out the illiteracy of 150 years and make our people efficient, productive and responsible citizens of a democratic state' (Biswas and Agrawal 1986, 86). The Indian state saw the model as a link between a 'glorious pre-colonial past' and the promise of a 'glorious future'; it was intended to 'bring about a silent revolution in the domain of education for the regeneration of national life and preservation of all virtues of the age-old civilisation which India had in the past' (MoE 1958, 13). Discussions regarding primary and Basic education in subsequent CABE meetings till 1960 demonstrate two things. First, monitoring and improving primary education took a backseat, with Azad explicitly declaring the urgency of prioritising secondary and higher education reforms (Biswas and Agrawal 1986). Second, the Indian state's conviction in Basic education restricted any introspection or authentic evaluation of primary education. For instance, in the 1956 CABE meeting, Azad criticised comments that highlighted the government's inadequate consideration of elementary education, and responded to them by emphasising how Basic education was already in place as the government's clear plan for primary schools (Biswas and Agrawal 1986).

As such, while the state remained committed to Basic education in primary schools, its focus on secondary and tertiary education meant that the expansion of

Basic schools was uneven. There were 34,205 Basic schools in India in 1951, which were roughly 16% of all primary schools in the country. While the number of these schools rose to 47,813 by 1955, the proportion of Basic schools continued to be around 16% (MoESR Ministry of Education & Scientific Research 1958). Only the state of Uttar Pradesh had converted all its elementary schools into Basic schools; other states were largely inconsistent in their efforts (Ayyar 2016). In response, the conversion of all non-Basic schools into Basic schools was made a central directive (MoE Ministry of Education 1958), and a national orientation program for this transition was also conceived (MoESW Ministry of Education and Social Welfare 1958). The government set up the National Institute of Basic Education in 1956 to conduct research on improving the model and teacher preparation, and an Assessment Committee on Basic Education in 1955 to survey the model's implementation and recommend pathways for its expansion (Biswas and Aggarwal 1972). Additionally, proposals were made to introduce Basic education to urban schools as an experiment, with activities like printing or construction as well as the English language to be included (MoE 1958).

A flawed model?

As Basic education gained prominence, several concerns emerged among government officials, educators, and the public alike. Critics pointed out that it was 'nothing short of cruelty' to make the child do income-generating work 'during the stage when he [*sic*] ought to be playing and enjoying himself' (NIBE 1960, 14), as well as how student-made products lacked sufficient quality for generating revenue (Sherman 2018). However, the biggest shortcomings of Basic education were related to three aspects.

Resources and capacity

In 1958, Nehru urged states to invest more resources into improving teacher quality in Basic schools, based on an assumption that infrastructural costs for the model were negligible (*ToI* 1958a). However, running Basic schools was quite expensive, as it included costs of materials, production infrastructure, training, etc. India's education budget at the time was lower than 2% of the GDP, out of which a mere 30% was allocated to primary schools – including Basic and non-Basic schools (Tilak 2007). As a result, the implementation of Basic education was severely constrained by a lack of funds. Additionally, finding a suitable cadre of teachers to execute this ambitious model was extremely difficult, as was conducting rigorous and contextually relevant training programmes for them (Sherman 2018). By 1959, amid growing criticism of Basic education, the ministry of education began attributing the shortcomings of its implementation to a 'lack of adequate preparation and skill on part of teachers and proper guidance by the Education Departments of the states' (Biswas and Agrawal 1986, 113). This was largely true; given budgetary restrictions and capacity limitations, states that had earlier committed to opening multiple Basic schools, started focusing more on conventional, non-Basic schools – which were significantly cost-effective and easier to staff (Holzwarth 2014; *ToI* 1954). Despite the initial momentum that expanded Basic schools, a 'lukewarm attitude [towards the model] was creeping in' by 1961 (Biswas and Aggarwal 1972, 41).

Economic relevance

Attempts to expand Basic education in all primary schools severely ruptured the colonial era primary-to-tertiary education pipeline (Zachariah 1970). Conventional schools and universities viewed Basic schools as sites of minimal learning and 'non-educational' activities. Considering it impossible to integrate children from Basic schools into a modern workforce (NCERT 1961), institutions were hesitant to admit Basic school students in higher grades or for higher education. Given most of such tertiary institutions had controlled the means of workforce development since the colonial era, the ostracisation of Basic school students posed severe threats to their future employment prospects. This sparked a concern that Basic schools were rapidly producing misfits due to a lack of alignment between India's economic policy centred around industrial growth and the model's rural upliftment focus (NIBE 1960). Doubts emerged about the relevance of an education centred around small-scale occupations at a time when India was aiming for giant strides in economic development. For instance, the Assessment Committee on Basic Education emphasised the urgent need for avoiding the model to be 'frozen around certain crafts' and for it to be reoriented to keep pace with 'the needs of a society that has to be transformed with the help of science and technology' (Biswas and Aggarwal 1972, 41).

Caste

Even though it was intended to counter caste differences by engaging all students in a school in a common labour, the embedded hierarchies of caste in Indian society created significant tensions for Basic education. Gandhi's actions, as an upper caste man, for the upliftment of oppressed castes have often been seen as patronising of oppressed castes in ways that erase Dalit agency and activism (Bagchi 2014, DN 1991). Advocates of the model (often caste elites themselves) failed to address the daily realities of rural schools as segregated spaces, where privileged caste teachers would often exclude marginalised caste students from learning experiences. Further, several marginalised castes saw the centring of Basic education around a local craft as their children's sustained relegation to family professions (Zachariah 1970). Seeing education as a means for social mobility, they felt Basic education would stop their children from becoming more competitive and climbing up the social ladder in the hierarchy of caste-based professions. Many expressed their contempt:

> We do not send our children to [the local Basic school] beyond the fourth class, because those who pass out of '*nai talim*' cannot get jobs. So our boys go to Wardha town; they walk four miles to study in a conventional school. . . . We don't want to remain tillers of the soil forever. We also want to become lawyers and doctors. '*nai talim*' is no good for that. (Nair 1961, 187)

As such, marginalised castes saw Basic education as their extended relegation to being *backward*, which triggered fierce opposition. For instance, the state of Tamil Nadu modified the model (Ayyar 2016) and proposed the division of school hours into two segments – in the first half, children would learn traditional subjects in schools, and in the second, be at their homes to learn crafts from their families. This elicited major protests from the anti-caste movement in the state, which dubbed the system as *kula kalvi thittam* (hereditary caste education policy) – designed to impose the occupation of the

parents on the child and thus, maintain caste divisions (Ryerson 1988). In other contexts, many had started seeing Basic education as accentuating class structures by restricting it mainly to the marginalised, while middle and privileged classes received a different education. Sykes (1988) notes that 'throughout village India and especially among tribal peoples there sprang up a feeling of resentment, a suspicion that Basic schools were a deliberate attempt by the authorities to "keep them in their place" and deny equal opportunity' (50).

However, elite advocates continued to defend the model; for instance, a speaker at a national Basic education training felt that

> The ignorant villager does not understand the all round development that we aim at in the child in the Basic school. He judges the efficiency of the school by the immediate, tangible, academic achievements produced in the child. Secondly, the craft introduced in the Basic school, (spinning, agriculture or gardening) does not appeal to the villager, because it is nothing new to him, nor does the Basic school teach anything in the craft which the villager does not know. (NIBE 1960, 17)

Not just the oppressed, but even privileged castes opposed Basic education as they felt it forced their children to perform labour traditionally done by marginalised castes (Zachariah 1970). Thus, to preserve their electoral chances, state governments relying on votes from various caste groups were sceptical about enforcing the model. Reflecting on Basic education becoming a political issue, Ayyar (2016) equates the dilemma of the model to what most radical reforms face – the inability of a democratic society to convince the elite to adopt what they might see as inferior or the marginalised to not adopt what they see as superior.

Shifting priorities, new directions

Following India's independence in 1947, the Indian state assumed the primary responsibility for organising social life in the nation. Kaviraj (2010) explains that this state mediated contradictory pressures of being successors to both colonial governance as well as the nationalist sentiment. As such, while the state espoused ideological aspirations drawn from the latter – as in the case of Basic education, its legal-political institutions, like the education bureaucracy, remained unchanged from their colonial models in being devoid of nationalist sentiments. When the Nehruvian vision for state-led reconstruction of postcolonial India through industrial development was operationalised, it expanded the colonial bureaucratic structure across all spheres without any change in its ideology or culture (Chatterjee 1993, Kaviraj 2010). Thus, Basic education, premised on lofty ideals of nationalist reconstruction and social reform, was implemented through the 1950s by a bureaucratic system that was largely indifferent to its ideological goals and instead focused more on development through 'scientific' and 'de-politicized' planning and industrial expansion.

Amid this backdrop, a series of developments during the early-1960s weakened and subsequently ousted the focus on Basic education in India. First, wars with China and Pakistan in 1962 and 1965, respectively, led to budgets from sectors, like education, being diverted towards strengthening the military. Funds available for school education dropped drastically (Sherman 2018), as a result of which resource-intensive Basic schools

were gradually deprioritised in favour of cost-effective non-Basic schools. Second, a review of the Second Five Year Plan in 1961 revealed that only about half of eligible children attended primary school (Mackenzie 1959) – a reality that made many question the decision to expand Basic education across all schools instead of first expanding schooling access (Shukla 1987, Biswas and Agrawal 1986). State governments took steps to prioritise enrolment (*ToI 1958b*), and Basic education took a backseat. Third, a stagnant economy since independence spurred a fervent shift towards rapid industrialisation in the 1960s to compete economically with other nations. In 1965, M.C. Chagla, the Minister of Education, suggested that defence, agriculture, and production were the national priorities, and called on the education system to produce more engineers, technicians, and scientists (Biswas and Agrawal 1986). In response, vocational schools for specific industrial needs became more relevant and technically superior to Basic schools – which were increasingly seen as obsolete. Gradually, the state conceded that Basic education was a failure (*ToI 1962*), and even its biggest advocates acknowledged the poor planning that damaged its prospects (*ToI 1963*).

To address these emerging priorities, the Indian government set up the 1964–66 Education Commission (popularly, the Kothari Commission). Reflective of the increasing international influence on Indian education at the time, the Commission included several consultants from Western industrialised nations to bring in a focus on comparative learning metrics and scientific subject areas. It suggested that Indian education required a 'drastic reconstruction, almost a revolution' (NCERT 1970, vii). In suggesting a science-oriented learning based on Indian culture and values as the core of education, the Commission ushered in a perspective of modernity as synonymous with nationalism, where grounding education in scientific temper was key to nation-building (Batra 2020). It linked education to four key objectives – increasing productivity, achieving national integration, speeding up modernisation, and cultivating social, moral, spiritual values (MoE 1966). In contrast to the self-empowering and context-specific dimensions of Basic education, the Commission believed that 'individual fulfilment will come, not through selfish and narrow loyalties to personal or group interests but through the dedication of all to the wider loyalties of national development in all its parameters' (NCERT 1970, 6).

Majorly driven by a human capital perspective, the Commission's urgent priority was linking education to productivity as the existing system was considered 'too academic to be of material help in increasing national wealth' (NCERT 1970, 8). The Kothari Commission's 'stress on a curriculum emphasising scientific rationality and an industry-oriented goal of modernity' (Poddar 2006, 206) didn't align with Basic education. The Commission proposed an upgrade on Basic education through a separate domain of work experience.

> In our country a revolutionary experiment was launched by Mahatma Gandhi in the form of basic education. The concept of work experience is essentially similar. It may be described as a redefinition of his educational thinking in terms of society launched on the road to industrialization. (NCERT 1970, 11)

This new curricular domain was more about training in a specific vocation *outside* the learning of subject areas, in contrast to Basic education's integrated focus. Including work experience (called socially useful productive work or SUPW) in school education

was seen as an elegant way to replace Basic education without fully disregarding its theme of productive work (Shukla 1987).

While the Commission's recommendations did get some attention, they remained largely unimplemented, as the state continued to wrestle with expanding educational access (Naik 1997). However, the Commission's ideas still had a strong influence on India's first ever National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1968. There was no mention of the term Basic education in this NPE, or in the subsequent Fourth Five Year Plan in 1969 (Biswas and Aggarwal 1972) – a clear indication that a conscious effort was being put to erase Basic education from policy parlance. In the coming decades, as India continued to struggle with universal enrolment, continuous pressures from globalisation discourses as well as internal social issues of caste and religion severely impeded the Nehruvian aspiration of the country's postcolonial resurgence as a self-reliant modern economy (Menon and Nigam 2007) – leaving any prospects of educational reimagination in a limbo. As such, the conventional, colonial era focus on lecture-based instruction, disconnected subject areas, and culturally detached, decontextualised curricula became further entrenched as the primary model of learning in Indian schools.

Discussion and conclusion

As a radical experiment for its time, the Basic education program was motivated by a nationalistic urge to decolonise schools by challenging colonial models of education. In doing so, it advocated for an integrated, activity-based, and culturally relevant paradigm of learning. Some of the core features at the heart of Basic education, such as its emphasis on experiential learning and on the child's holistic development in schools, reflected larger ideas that continue to be considered educationally progressive around the world today. However, in no way does this paper argue that Basic education was exemplary; it highlights several shortcomings that not only made it unsustainable but also enabled fierce opposition against it (see also, Rao 2014). Its orientation towards developing self-sustainability grounded in local contexts was certainly at odds with the national focus at the time on collective economic growth through industrialisation. Perhaps even more importantly, its envisioned social reform agenda of dignifying manual labour and challenging caste divisions, despite well-intentioned, was mainly directed towards privileged castes – as it provided little possibility to marginalised castes for any upward socio-economic mobility. As such, the condensed history of Basic education in India in this paper demonstrates the various contradictions that complicated the model and eventually led to its termination. Through this paper, I want to highlight that the case of Basic education in India is a story of both possibility and caution; I use this to make two nuanced arguments tied to current schooling paradigms in global education.

First, I argue that the concept of *basic* in education – in terms of what is considered foundational to other dimensions of learning – is not a static idea, but one that varies dynamically. As such, despite being spoken about as commonsensical, any notion of *basic* entails specific beliefs about who the child should be and how learning happens. Gandhi referred to his model as *buniyadi talim* (foundational or basic education) as he believed what was *basic* for children was for them to understand their surroundings and contexts better, and to engage in manual activities – a quicker approach to developing intelligence than book-reading (Narayan 1997). Believing that 'literacy in itself is no education'

(quoted in MoE 1956, 1), he emphasised that reading and writing were skills to be given to children after they gained a significant understanding of the world, so that they could use them to make sense of it. He believed that 'the commencement of training by teaching the alphabet and reading and writing hampers [children's] intellectual growth … We kill [intellect] by imposing the alphabet on little children and making it the beginning of learning' (13–14). Thus, Gandhi's theory of change about learning was underpinned by his vision of a child as a self-sufficient, contextually aware, and evolving citizen. These schemata fit perfectly into the Indian state's larger nationalistic and rural upliftment aspirations right after independence – thus, making the Gandhian model representative of *basic* education at that time.

Today, however, *basic* in Indian education parlance refers mainly to simple reading or arithmetic skills. This is largely aligned to current global discourses around FLN, which is assumed as a prerequisite for any further learning (Belafi, Hwa, and Kaffenberger 2020, Beeharry 2021). This conception of *basic* mainly draws from human capital perspectives which frame education quality through a rates-of-return logic, and thus identify simple literacy and numeracy skills as indicators associated with better economic returns, wages, and productivity (Tikly and Barrett 2011, Barrett 2011). In this notion of *basic*, the child is understood as a future economic citizen whose productivity would contribute to national economic growth – which aligns with current developmental narratives in LMICs like India. In sum, I suggest that there is no singular *basic* education; instead, what is considered basic or foundational depends on dominant social, political, and economic dimensions of the state at a given time or in a given context. As such, future research into tracing the history of education in LMICs can reveal alternative notions of *basic*, which in turn can shed further light on national priorities and the politics of learning during specific historical eras. Additionally, these differing ideas of *basic* are rooted in particular contexts, and thus, offer the possibility of building contextually relevant learning paradigms around them – in contrast to universal ones that dominate current discussions of learning in LMICs.

Second, and in relation to the above possibility of contextually relevant models of learning in LMICs, I make a cautionary point about considering any *local* model as necessarily the same. While prior scholarship has rightfully critiqued the dominant paradigm of learning in global education as universalistic and decontextualised (R. Alexander 2008, Schweisfurth 2023), I suggest that the alternative cannot just be any *local* learning model that promises social justice and contextual relevance. In other words, it is critical to avoid a simplistic lens of assuming learning approaches developed locally in LMICs as contextually relevant and empowering. Given the diversity and entrenched inequities of LMICs like India, the *local* is not singular; instead, there are likely to be multiple *locals* that emerge from the vantage point of different population groups. As such, while a given *local* learning model in an LMIC might be relatively more contextual than an imposed or standardised global paradigm, it might not be representative or inclusive of the multiplicity of contexts within the nation.

Basic education was conceived as a *local* model to decolonise schooling and uplift the masses; yet it was designed by, advocated for, and implemented by primarily upper-caste leaders and bureaucrats in India. While conceived locally, it was not only detached from the economic priorities of the nationalistic project it was supposed to represent but also from the social realities of the people it was supposed to benefit. Despite the intentions of

bridging caste divides and developing economic self-sufficiency, it hardly offered any agency, power, or promise to marginalised castes and classes, who subsequently rejected it in favour of more conventional schooling. Even though the epistemology of Basic education seemingly challenged a colonial status quo in education, it still did not adequately challenge local power relations and inequitable social orders. Thus, this case speaks to the intersectional complexity of *local* models of learning. As such, in relation to viewing *local* models of education as contextually- or culturally relevant, it becomes imperative to ask – Which local? Whose culture, and whose context? As decided by who?

At the same time, this precarious understanding of the *local* is further complicated by the historical circulation of learning models across geographies and contexts (Bagchi 2014). At a time of increased levels of globalised flows of learning paradigms today (Steiner-Khamsi 2014), the development of *local* models of learning might not necessarily be inert from globally accepted or standardised ideas. As such, this demands a nuanced approach to thinking about contextually relevant teaching and learning in LMICs beyond rigid boundaries of the *local* and the *global*.

Basic education continues to survive in a handful of schools today in India, for instance, in Gandhian communities like Sewagram, or as *Buniyadi Vidyalayas* (Basic schools) in other states. Despite recommendations (such as in the National Policy of Education, 1986) and recent efforts to revive these schools at a limited scale (*ToI 2018*), most Basic schools now exist as dilapidated spaces with less than bare minimum enrolment. As such, they exist as mere relics of a moment in India's education history when a radical experiment was attempted and failed. While Basic education was ousted in the 1960s in favour of an industrially productive and scientific brand of education, schooling in India has continued to struggle in consistently providing adequate economic mobility or social dignity to oppressed castes and classes. Despite commendable achievements in maximising enrolment in schools, learning inequities and economic disparities between the privileged and the marginalised continue to widen in India. At a time when Indian education is increasingly being mediated through standardised educational regimes and shallow notions of measurable learning, the need for radical reimaginations, culturally specific learning, and bold new ideas is higher than ever. By telling the story of an alternative, albeit deeply flawed, experiment in the past, this paper hopes to highlight some of the cautions that any new approach that seeks to disrupt the educational status quo in schools, needs to wrestle with.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term Basic education (capitalised) to refer to the experimental learning model devised by Gandhi and further shaped by his ideas. The usage of the term basic (non-capitalised) elsewhere refers to its conventional meaning of a foundational, essential, or bare minimum quantum of education (in this case).
2. The usage of 'India' in this subsection on education in colonial India anachronistically refers to the larger South Asian territory governed by the British empire, which included present-day Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc.
3. Three R's have often been used as a term globally for what were considered as the most functional elements of schooling – reading, writing, and arithmetic.
4. Recent and more popular notions of caste in India draw from the *varna* conception of four occupational categories, which divides society into Brahmins (the priestly class), Kshatriyas

(rulers, administrators), Vaishyas (farmers, merchants, artisans), Shudras (the labouring class), as well as Dalits – who were considered outside the scope of this system and deemed 'untouchable'. However, scholars like Jodhka (2015) have argued that it wasn't occupational groups that were necessarily at the heart of the Indian caste system, but the idea of a hierarchical social order. As such, a *jati* conception of caste organised society not along four professional groups, but numerous endogamous groups which had no single consistent order of hierarchy.

5. Several examples of Basic education mentioned in literature often use 'spinning' or 'weaving' as the craft to illustrate the model. The spinning wheel or charkha was used by Gandhi to make his own clothes while in prison, and thus became an emblem of defiance and self-sufficiency during the struggle against colonialism.

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