

**Critiquing, Challenging, and Questioning Power Dynamics and Gender Inequities:  
A Critical Perspective in the Adolescent Education Programme in India**

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**Introduction**

Sexuality education stands in a tug-of-war against the cultural and moral ethos of India, where public discussion of topics of a sexual nature is widely considered taboo (Das, 2014). This acts as a barrier to the implementation of effective sexuality education in schools nationwide. This was evident in 2006 when the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP), introduced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the National AIDS Control Organization, was rejected by twelve states as culturally inappropriate (Gabler, 2012). Since the backlash, the AEP has undergone multiple changes to make it as agreeable to all as possible (Malik, 2022). In its present form, along with its strengths, the AEP also has many gaps and challenges, allowing for continued improvement.

Against this background, in this paper, I critically analyze the AEP curriculum that supports or resists gendered power dynamics in the Indian educational context by engaging in thematic analysis (TA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). When TA and CDA collaborate, the understanding of “power as embedded in texts as a way to reproduce understandings of social positioning and reinforce hegemonic understandings of culture” (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 94) comes into clearer focus. The current AEP curriculum has been developed by the Ministry of Human Resource and Development and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as part of Ayushman Bharat, a flagship programme of the Government of India. Prepared for teachers and teacher educators, it focuses on students from the upper primary to the senior secondary levels in all schools (NCERT, 2020). I draw on my master’s thesis to propose pedagogic opportunities in this curriculum with the belief that education is a form of political intervention and can create possibilities for individual and social transformation in school environments and the larger society (Lee & Johnstone, 2023).

**Background and Context**

Historically, sexuality education programmes for young people in India have failed to take a particularly nuanced approach to gender and sexuality (Daruwalla et al., 2018). Scholars like Nanda et al. (2013) have revealed that the content and approach of the AEP curriculum do not adequately address the structural and power inequities that girls and women face in India. The AEP also does not provide the skills students need to be able to challenge and question socially accepted gender roles and expectations. In the document, socially accepted gendered power dynamics “emphasize patriarchy, power relations, and hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity and contribute to the problem of sexual violence” (Nieder et al., 2019, 1720) and sexual harassment against girls and women in India. In addition, there has not been a step forward in education toward equitable supports for LGBTQ+ communities thus far (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014). There remains an urgent need to resist heteronormative discourses and power dynamics that privilege heterosexuality in schools. For education practices and structures to be more equitable, LGBTQ+ people and communities must be valued, represented, and supported in curricula and school environments.

### **Gaps and Opportunities**

The AEP curriculum presents several gaps and opportunities that must be acknowledged and addressed to be effective for Indian youth.

#### **Gender-Based Restrictions**

The Indian patriarchal society gives families and communities the right to dictate the lives of girls and women, resulting in their subordination and disempowerment (Nieder et al., 2019). Despite being cognizant of the need to recognize and challenge gender-based discrimination in the Indian socio-cultural environment, patriarchal discourses in the curriculum legitimize more freedom for boys while promoting close monitoring and surveilling of girls and women. This is done through discourses, such as Reena's father and Laali's maternal uncle imposing mobility restrictions on them (NCERT, 2020). The enforcement of strict gender norms by male members in familial settings is a reflection of male dominance over women in Indian society. Such discursive practices not only normalize gender hierarchies but also miss the opportunity to help adolescent boys critique patriarchal gender attitudes.

Moreover, patriarchal discourses found in the curriculum validate the sexual control of women by repressing women's sexual desires and expression. These discourses shame women for having "dirty thoughts" and watching "inappropriate content" (NCERT, 2020). Other discourses in the curriculum, such as a group of boys deciding to visit a sex worker, grant boys and men unrestricted sexual freedom (NCERT, 2020). Such discursive practices promote a victim blaming mentality that blames women for sending boys and men "wrong signals" by engaging in behavior that violates appropriate gender norms (Nieder et al., 2019).

Therefore, these discourses necessitate that curriculum writers replace patriarchal discourses that perpetuate gender hierarchies, depict men wielding power over women, and shame women for having sexual desires with discourses that do not enforce a power dynamic in familial and community settings. There is a need to replace these discourses with examples that depict women having the freedom to make their own decisions regarding their mobility outside their homes or enjoying the freedom to openly and freely discuss topics of sexual nature. Such restructuring will help adolescent boys shed patriarchal values and attitudes while also teaching the value of equality and respect toward all women, leading to a more equitable society.

#### **Norms of Femininity and Masculinity**

While women in India are encouraged to internalize gender norms of submission and subservience, men internalize those of domination and control (Nieder et al., 2019). Even if curriculum discourses aim to engender "new norms of masculinity and femininity", depictions of women as submissive and subservient and men as dominating and abusive are evident (NCERT, 2020, p. 87). Discursive examples, for instance, a boyfriend slapping his girlfriend or a husband hitting his wife, negate the very purpose of these aims. Such discursive practices mirror the normative behavioral standards for women and men as contextualized within Indian society, resulting in power hierarchies that legitimize sexual violence by men and its acceptance by women (Nieder et al., 2019).

Due to these reasons, these discourses highlight the need to restructure the curriculum by amending content that permeates prevailing norms of femininity and masculinity. Taking their own advice into consideration, curriculum authors must make a concerted effort to replace

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discourses that portray women as weak, submissive, and subservient with examples of confident women who are not afraid to stand up for themselves. It is also important that examples that depict men as aggressive, dominating, and violent be replaced by examples of boyfriends/husbands who are kind, gentle, and caring toward their partners. Such restructuring would help young people to question and challenge regressive norms of femininity and masculinity and promote gender equity.

### **Gender-Prescribed Familial Roles**

The patriarchal structure of Indian society also views women as better suited to be housewives and caregivers and men as breadwinners, thereby perpetuating gender asymmetries (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). While curriculum discourses depict adolescent boys performing household chores, gender-prescribed roles for women and men are consistently depicted in adulthood (NCERT, 2020). Women are shown as housewives responsible for domestic chores and childrearing and men as primary financial providers. Such discursive practices display gender disparities that disadvantage girls by dictating their future life trajectory as wives and mothers and limiting their opportunities and achievements. Thus, curriculum writers must remove any material that presents women and men in strict gender roles and include examples that depict them in nontraditional roles. For example, men taking care of the home and raising children, and women in leadership or professional roles. Such restructuring would help young learners critique traditional gender roles that stand in the way of achieving gender equity in Indian society.

### **Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity**

The heteropatriarchal nature of Indian society validates unfavorable attitudes toward sexual and gender identities (Pufahl et al., 2021). Heteronormative discourses present in the curriculum emphasize a denial of any kind of sex that exists outside of reproduction, thereby privileging heteronormativity (NCERT, 2020). Alluding to the non-existence of non-normative identities in Indian society by refraining from using words such as “gay”, “lesbian”, “queer”, or “same-sex”, the curriculum invisibilizes these communities, who are already stigmatized and discriminated against in the Indian socio-cultural environment (Pufahl et al., 2021). These discourses not only tell young queer people that they are not important but also miss the opportunity to address global myths, for example, that HIV/AIDS is a “gay disease” or that homosexuality is “curable”. This could have been an excellent opportunity to debunk such global myths that are still persistent today.

In a similar vein, transphobic discourses in the curriculum reinforce stigma, discrimination, and violence against the transgender community. By including discourses that ask learners if transgender people should have the same rights as other genders, the curriculum cannot obscure the fact that it privileges heteronormativity (NCERT, 2020). The hesitancy to include transgender people on an equal footing with cis people suggests that Indian society has not fully embraced this community thus far. In this way, cis peers fail to benefit from these queer and trans-affirming discourses. Discursive practices of omission inadvertently teach young learners that the struggles of transgender people are not important or worth discussing. Additionally, the curriculum also fails to include examples of gender euphoria or joy that transgender people experience because of living in a way that is congruent with their gender identity (Chakrapani et al., 2022). Due to such absences, cis learners miss out on the peer support

that they could provide to their transgender peers. This also fails to allow them to critically examine their privileged position at school and in wider society.

Hence, curriculum writers must move beyond perfunctory efforts to be inclusive of transgender people and provide them with an equal space with cis people. It is crucial to replace examples that may perpetuate deficit discourses and include examples that make space for gender euphoria or joy. The stigma, discrimination, and marginalization experienced by them should also form an essential component of discursive practices to make the curriculum truly inclusive.

### **Conclusion**

The significance of sexuality education is crucial in conservative societies like India where traditional norms and attitudes perpetuate gender hierarchies and power dynamics (Nieder et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021). By contextualizing the Adolescent Education Programme in terms of gender and sexuality, the curriculum can be made more robust and concrete. This would help in dismantling and deconstructing problematic issues, such as patriarchy and gender hierarchies, that have plagued Indian society for centuries (Nieder et al., 2019). There also needs to be a serious effort to include queer and transgender identities on an equal footing with heteronormative identities (Pufahl et al., 2021). This curriculum can be further strengthened by evolving a critical perspective. This will allow young people to examine notions of inequality, exploitation, oppression, and domination through reflective discussions and debates surrounding gender and sexuality in a highly heteropatriarchal Indian socio-cultural environment.

In this qualitative research study, I combined thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis to uncover how societal power relations are established and reinforced with implicit and explicit messages embedded in gendered discourses in the AEP curriculum. By exposing discursive patterns of patriarchal gender ideology and heteronormativity in the curriculum, this study demonstrated how the reproduction of dominant discourses reinforces the status quo that subjugates women and LGBTQ+ communities. In this way, such discourses inhibit the development of a more inclusive and equitable educational and social system for all.

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