Impact Factor (SJIF): 6.126 E-ISSN: 2583-1615, P-ISSN: 3049-3498

International Journal of Research in Academic World

Received: 09/April/2025 **IJRAW:** 2025; 4(5):256-260 **Accepted:** 19/May/2025

Decolonising the Curriculum: Indigenous Knowledge, Orality and Experiential Narratives in Social Sciences

[*1]Dr. Deepali Aparajita Dungdung

[*1]Department of Sociology, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Abstract

Academic disciplines are historically constituted domains of inquiry shaped by epistemological assumptions that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge, who can produce it, and how it may be validated. These assumptions are institutionalised through disciplinary practices such as methodological conventions, canonical texts, and curricular frameworks. Modern university curricula—particularly in the social sciences—have largely emerged from Eurocentric intellectual traditions that privilege written archives, positivist epistemologies, and claims to universal objectivity. Such frameworks have historically marginalised Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), oral traditions, community memory, and embodied forms of knowledge.

This paper examines how decolonial and Indigenous methodologies can transform contemporary higher education by rethinking curricula, expanding legitimate sources of knowledge, and foregrounding oral narratives, memory, autobiographical accounts, and community histories as sites of knowledge production. Drawing on decolonial theory and Indigenous research methodologies, the paper argues that integrating Indigenous knowledge into academic curricula requires structural shifts in epistemology, pedagogy, and canon formation rather than symbolic or token inclusion. Using examples from the Sociology curricula of Ranchi University, the paper demonstrates how courses on tribal societies, oral traditions, and Adivasi knowledge systems reflect ongoing attempts to rework disciplinary frameworks. Comparative examples from Indigenous education initiatives in other parts of the world

The paper tries to argue that decolonising the curriculum involves not only adding themes related to indigenous people but also transforming methodological hierarchies, recognising oral epistemologies, and creating dialogic spaces between academic and community knowledge systems. Such transformations challenge the dominance of colonial epistemologies while enabling more inclusive and contextually grounded forms of knowledge production.

Keywords: Curriculum, Decolonial, Indigenous, Tribal Studies, Knowledge, Social science.

Introduction

Universities are key institutions in the production, legitimisation, and circulation of knowledge. The disciplinary structures that organise modern academia emerged largely within European intellectual traditions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ben-David & Zloczower, 1962). These disciplinary formations brought with them specific epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge, methods of inquiry, and criteria of validity. As a result, academic knowledge production has historically privileged written texts, archival documentation, and claims to universal objectivity while marginalising other ways of knowing.

Scholars working within decolonial and postcolonial traditions have argued that these epistemic hierarchies are deeply tied to colonial histories (Patel, 2022). Colonialism was not merely a political or economic project but also an epistemic one that imposed European frameworks of knowledge while delegitimising Indigenous intellectual traditions (Mignolo, 2018). Educational institutions became important sites where colonial knowledge systems were reproduced and normalised. Consequently, Indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and community histories were often excluded from formal curricula or treated as objects of study rather than sources of theory and knowledge.

In recent decades, scholars across disciplines have called for the decolonisation of knowledge production and higher education. Decolonising the curriculum involves questioning whose knowledge is represented, whose voices are silenced, and what forms of knowledge are considered legitimate within academic institutions (Smith, 1999). It requires recognising the epistemic value of oral traditions, memory, storytelling, and lived experience—forms of knowledge that have historically been central to Indigenous societies.

Within the Indian context, these debates are particularly relevant in regions with large indigenous or *adivasi* populations. Jharkhand, where Ranchi University is located, is home to numerous Indigenous communities with rich traditions of oral history, ecological knowledge, and community-based forms of learning. However, the integration of these knowledge systems into university curricula remains

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Deepali Aparajita Dungdung

uneven and contested.

This paper examines how the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and oral epistemologies can transform social science curricula. Focusing on the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology at the university, it explores how curricular reforms and course content reflect emerging efforts to engage with Indigenous knowledge systems. The paper also situates these developments within broader global conversations about decolonising knowledge production.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper draws primarily from decolonial theory, Indigenous research methodologies, and critical curriculum studies.

- Decolonial scholars argue that colonialism created enduring hierarchies of knowledge that privileged Western epistemologies while marginalising others. Mignolo (2018) describes this phenomenon as the "coloniality of knowledge," referring to the persistence of colonial epistemic structures even after the formal end of colonial rule. According to this perspective, modern academic disciplines continue to operate within epistemological frameworks shaped by colonial histories.
- The coloniality of knowledge manifests in several ways. First, Western philosophical traditions are often presented as universal frameworks for understanding society and history. Second, written documentation and archival sources are privileged over oral traditions and community memory. Third, academic authority is typically located within institutions rather than communities.
- Decolonising knowledge production therefore involves recognising the plurality of epistemologies and challenging the assumption that Western modes of knowledge are universally applicable.
- Indigenous research methodologies emphasise relationality, community engagement, and respect for Indigenous ways of knowing. Smith (1999) argues that research within Indigenous contexts must move beyond extractive models in which communities are merely subjects of study. Instead, research should be conducted in ways that acknowledge Indigenous intellectual traditions and involve communities as active participants in knowledge production.
- Indigenous epistemologies often place strong emphasis on oral traditions, storytelling, and collective memory. These forms of knowledge are not simply narratives but complex systems for transmitting historical, ecological, and cultural knowledge across generations.
- Recognising these epistemologies within academic curricula requires expanding the range of sources considered legitimate within scholarly inquiry.
- Postcolonial scholars have also examined the politics of representation within knowledge systems. Spivak (1988) famously asked whether the subaltern can speak within dominant discursive frameworks. Her argument highlights how institutional structures often prevent marginalised voices from being heard or recognised as legitimate sources of knowledge.
- Within academic curricula, this problem manifests in the absence of Indigenous authors, scholars, and narratives. Even when Indigenous communities are studied, they are often represented through external academic frameworks rather than through their own epistemologies.
- Decolonising the curriculum therefore requires creating spaces where Indigenous voices and intellectual traditions can shape disciplinary conversations. To illustrate the same, this paper analyses how non-academic writings by women, including autobiographies, fictional and non-fictional writings allow a deeper understanding of the women's question in the Indian context.

Method

This paper analyses the social science curricula particularly that of Sociology and Anthropology at a state university in Jharkhand to understand how courses or topics that are related to indigenous, tribes and traditional knowledge taught. The paper also analyses courses on women's studies and how they have incorporated non-academic writings to provide a holistic understanding of the subject. In a similar vein, one explores the possibility of decolonial approaches to teaching courses on tribes and traditional knowledge.

Autobiographical Narratives, Feminist Writings, and the Production of Hidden Histories

One the first attempts towards decolonising knowledge in academic came from feminist quarters. Teaching of gender or women's studies courses in the Indian context has occurred through the inclusion of writings by Indian women which were not necessarily academic in nature. Autobiographical writings and experiential narratives have played a crucial role in expanding the scope of social science. These narratives provide access to forms of knowledge that are often absent from mainstream historical and sociological accounts. In contrast to official records or colonial archives—which tend to document the perspectives of elites, administrators, and reformers—personal narratives reveal the everyday experiences, emotions, and struggles of individuals located within marginalised social positions. Scholars have therefore argued that autobiographical texts can function as important sociological documents that illuminate hidden histories and lived realities (Chakravorty & Tharu, 1991; Rege, 2013).

Early feminist writings in India demonstrate how experiential knowledge can challenge dominant social narratives. One of the earliest and most powerful critiques of patriarchy is Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulna* (A Comparison Between Women and Men), written in 1882. In this essay, Shinde sharply criticised the patriarchal double standards embedded within Brahmanical social structures. Writing in response to the public condemnation of a young widow accused of sexual misconduct, Shinde questioned why women were subjected to harsh moral judgement while men's transgressions were routinely ignored. Her text exposed the hypocrisy of social norms governing gender and sexuality and highlighted the deeply unequal moral codes that structured nineteenth-century Indian society. Because it emerged from a woman's standpoint rather than from male reformist discourse, *Stree Purush Tulna* provides a rare insider critique of gender relations in colonial India (Rege, 2013).

Similarly, the writings of Pandita Ramabai, particularly *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), offered a powerful critique of the social conditions faced by upper-caste Hindu women. Ramabai documented practices such as child marriage, widowhood, and restrictions on women's education, highlighting the structural inequalities embedded within patriarchal and caste-based systems. Her work challenged both colonial representations of Indian society and nationalist attempts to idealise the status of women within traditional social structures (Ramabai, 1887/2000).

Autobiographical narratives written by women themselves also provide valuable insights into everyday experiences that

are rarely documented in historical archives. One of the earliest examples is the autobiography *Amar Jiban* (1876) by Rassundari Devi, which is widely considered the first autobiography written by an Indian woman. In this work, Devi recounts how she secretly learned to read and write despite the strict social restrictions imposed on women within nineteenth-century Bengali society. Her narrative illustrates how literacy itself became a form of resistance within patriarchal social structures.

Another influential feminist text is *Sultana's Dream* (1905) by Begum Rokeya, a utopian short story imagining a society governed by women in which gender roles are reversed and scientific progress is used to promote social equality. Although fictional, the narrative functions as a powerful critique of patriarchal social norms and highlights the transformative potential of feminist imagination.

More contemporary autobiographical narratives have continued to expand the archive of experiential knowledge within Indian social science. Texts such as *My Story* by Kamala Das, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *Karukku* by Bama, and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar reveal the complex intersections of gender, caste, and social inequality in modern India (Bama, 1992/2012; Kamble, 2008; Pawar, 2015). These narratives provide deeply personal accounts of social discrimination, family life, labour, and resistance, thereby expanding our understanding of how structural inequalities operate in everyday life.

Dalit and feminist scholars have argued that such autobiographical writings constitute an alternative epistemological archive because they foreground lived experiences that are often excluded from dominant academic discourse. Sharmila Rege describes these narratives as "testimonios" that challenge dominant caste and gender hierarchies by making visible the experiences of those who have historically been silenced within mainstream historiography (Rege, 2013).

Incorporating these autobiographical texts into social science curricula therefore enables students to engage with alternative forms of knowledge production that foreground lived experience, memory, and personal narrative. Such texts complicate conventional academic approaches that rely primarily on official records and theoretical abstractions. By bringing insider perspectives into scholarly discourse, autobiographical narratives expand the epistemological boundaries of social science research and contribute to broader efforts to decolonise knowledge production.

Incorporating such autobiographical and experiential writings into university curricula has important implications for the decolonisation of knowledge within the social sciences. Academic curricula have historically privileged canonical texts produced by elite mostly male scholars, often marginalising narratives that emerge from lived experiences of women, Dalits, and other subaltern groups. As a result, the everyday realities of marginalised communities remain underrepresented within disciplinary knowledge. The inclusion of non-academic texts within sociology and anthropology curricula can and has helped expand the epistemological boundaries of these disciplines by foregrounding experiential knowledge and insider perspectives. These writings not only document personal experiences but also provide critical analyses of gender, caste, and social inequality within Indian society. When included as primary texts in courses on gender studies, social history, or Indian society, they enable students to engage directly with the voices of those who historically occupied marginal positions within social hierarchies. Scholars have argued that such curricular interventions are essential for challenging dominant knowledge structures and creating more inclusive and reflexive forms of social science education (Rege, 2013; Chakravorty & Tharu, 1991).

From a Foucauldian perspective, curriculum itself can be understood as a site where power and knowledge intersect. Decisions about which texts are included in syllabi, and which are excluded shape the boundaries of legitimate knowledge within academic disciplines (Foucault, 1980). By incorporating autobiographical narratives, oral histories, and feminist writings into the curriculum, universities can challenge the dominance of elite textual traditions and create space for alternative epistemologies. Such curricular transformations not only broaden the scope of sociological inquiry but also enable students to critically examine the power relations embedded within knowledge production itself.

As courses teaching issues of gender and women have incorporated writings that are not necessarily 'academic', they offer an illustration for teaching indigenous or tribal studies.

Orality, Memory and Knowledge Production

The context of Jharkhand necessitates the inclusion of oral knowledge in curricula and teaching. Oral traditions and collective memory have historically been central to knowledge transmission in many indigenous societies (Ilutsik, 2002; Mahuika, 2019). Stories, songs, rituals, and narratives function as repositories of ecological knowledge, social norms, and historical memory. However, modern academic institutions have often treated these forms of knowledge as anecdotal or supplementary rather than as legitimate epistemological frameworks.

Anthropologists and sociologists have increasingly recognised that oral histories offer valuable insights into social processes, cultural transformations, and historical experiences. Oral narratives often preserve perspectives that are absent from written archives, particularly the experiences of marginalised communities.

In regions such as Jharkhand, oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving community histories. Adivasi communities maintain rich traditions of storytelling, myth, and song that convey historical memory, ecological knowledge, and social values. Integrating these traditions into university curricula can help challenge the dominance of textual knowledge while also making education more relevant to local contexts.

The recognition of oral epistemologies also requires methodological shifts. Researchers must develop approaches that respect the narrative structure of oral traditions and acknowledge the relational contexts in which they are produced. An emphasis on making curriculums inclusive by incorporating tradition knowledge one can aim towards decolonial learning within social sciences.

Curricula are not neutral collections of knowledge but structured frameworks that reflect broader intellectual and dominant ideas. Decisions about which texts to include which theories to emphasise, and which methodologies to teach shape the boundaries of legitimate knowledge within a discipline. Critical curriculum scholars argue that academic curricula often reproduce dominant power structures by privileging certain forms of knowledge while excluding others. Decolonising the curriculum therefore involves critically examining the epistemological assumptions embedded within disciplinary frameworks. In the social sciences, this process often involves revisiting canonical texts,

expanding reading lists to include diverse perspectives, and incorporating local knowledge systems into teaching.

Reworking the Curriculum: Examples from teaching Social Sciences in Jharkhand

Jharkhand occupies a unique position within the Indian higher education landscape because of its proximity to Indigenous communities and *adivasi* intellectual traditions. Over the years, there have been attempts within the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum.

Teaching Tribal Society and Culture

Courses focusing on tribal society and culture provide an entry point for engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems. Such courses examine social organisation, kinship structures, religious practices, and customary laws among *adivasi* communities.

Traditionally, these courses relied heavily on classical anthropological texts written by colonial ethnographers and administrators. However, recent times have seen shifts towards incorporating research that emphasises perspectives from within. This shift reflects an effort to move beyond colonial anthropological frameworks toward more participatory and reflexive forms of scholarship.

Furthermore, the recent academic discourse emphasises on traditional knowledge systems through the National Education Policy 2020 necessitates that one includes indigenous knowledge through its different forms in curriculum. This represents an important step toward recognising oral epistemologies within academic training. Instead of treating oral narratives merely as folklore, the curriculum encourages students to analyse them as historical and sociological sources.

For example, students conducting fieldwork in villages in Jharkhand often collect narratives related to migration histories, land struggles, and community rituals. Such narratives provide insights into local experiences of colonialism, displacement, and development.

Another area where curricular transformation is visible is in the study of Indigenous ecological knowledge. Courses on environment and society increasingly acknowledge the ecological knowledge embedded within Adivasi agricultural practices, forest management systems, and rituals.

This perspective challenges dominant development paradigms that portray Indigenous communities as backward or environmentally destructive. Instead, Indigenous ecological knowledge is recognised as a valuable resource for sustainable environmental management.

Insights from other Global Contexts

Efforts to decolonise curricula and integrate Indigenous knowledge systems are not limited to India. Similar initiatives can be found in universities around the world. In New Zealand, Māori scholars have played a significant role in transforming academic research and education. Indigenous methodologies emphasising storytelling, genealogy, and community engagement have been incorporated into university programmes. Māori studies departments have developed curricula that centre Indigenous epistemologies rather than treating them as supplementary topics within mainstream disciplines.

In Latin American countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico, intercultural universities have been established to promote dialogue between Indigenous knowledge systems and Western academic traditions. These institutions often emphasise bilingual education, community participation, and locally relevant research agendas. Such initiatives demonstrate how institutional reforms can create spaces for epistemological pluralism within higher education.

Canadian universities have also witnessed growing recognition of First Nations research methodologies. Scholars emphasise relational approaches to research that prioritise community collaboration and respect for Indigenous protocols.

Many universities now require researchers working with Indigenous communities to follow ethical guidelines developed in consultation with those communities.

Challenges in Decolonising the Curriculum

Despite growing interest in decolonising knowledge production, several challenges remain.

First, institutional structures often resist epistemological change. Academic disciplines are deeply entrenched systems with established canons, methodologies, and evaluation criteria. Second, integrating Indigenous knowledge systems raises questions about translation and representation. Oral traditions and community knowledge may not easily fit into academic formats such as written essays or journal articles. Furthermore, merely adding Indigenous content to existing curricula without challenging underlying epistemological assumptions may reproduce existing hierarchies rather than dismantle them.

Addressing these challenges requires sustained institutional commitment and collaboration between universities and Indigenous communities.

Toward an Inclusive Epistemology

Decolonising the curriculum ultimately involves recognising that knowledge is plural and situated. Universities must move beyond the assumption that Western epistemologies represent universal frameworks for understanding the world.

Integrating Indigenous knowledge systems requires rethinking research methodologies, pedagogical practices, and institutional structures. Oral traditions, storytelling, and community memory should be recognised as legitimate sources of knowledge rather than as supplementary cultural artefacts.

Such transformations can enrich academic disciplines by expanding the range of perspectives and experiences included in scholarly inquiry.

Conclusion

- The decolonisation of knowledge production represents one of the most significant intellectual challenges facing contemporary academia. Academic disciplines have historically been shaped by colonial epistemologies that privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others.
- This paper has argued that integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into university curricula requires structural transformation rather than token inclusion. By recognising oral traditions, community memory, and Indigenous epistemologies as legitimate sources of knowledge, universities can move toward more inclusive and contextually grounded forms of scholarship.
- Examples from the Sociology and Anthropology curricula at Ranchi University illustrate how curricular reforms can create spaces for Indigenous perspectives within academic disciplines. Comparative examples from

other global contexts further demonstrate that such transformations are both possible and necessary.

- Decolonising the curriculum is not merely an academic exercise, but a broader intellectual and ethical project aimed at creating more equitable knowledge systems. By embracing epistemological plurality, universities can contribute to more democratic and inclusive forms of knowledge production.

References

1. Bama. *Karukku*. Oxford University Press; 2012. (Original work published 1992).
2. Battiste M. *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich Publishing; 2013.
3. Ben-David J, Zloczower A. Universities and academic systems in modern societies. *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie*. 1962;3(1):45-84.
4. Chakravorty U, Tharu S, editors. *Women writing in India: 600 B.C. to the present*. Oxford University Press; 1991.
5. Chilisa B. *Indigenous research methodologies*. Sage Publications; 2012.
6. Das K. *My story*. HarperCollins; 2009. (Original work published 1976).
7. Dei GJS. *Indigenous philosophies and critical education*. Peter Lang; 2011.
8. Ilutsik E. Oral Traditional Knowledge: Does it belong in the classroom. *Sharing Our Pathways*. 2002;7(3):1-16.
9. Kamble B. *The prisons we broke*. Orient BlackSwan; 2008.
10. Mahuika N. *Rethinking oral history and tradition: An Indigenous perspective*. Oxford University Press, USA; 2019.
11. Mignolo W. *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Duke University Press; 2018.
12. Nakata M. *Disciplining the savages, savaging the disciplines*. Aboriginal Studies Press; 2007.
13. Pawar U. *The weave of my life: A Dalit woman's memoir*. Columbia University Press; 2015.
14. Patel S. Colonialism and its knowledges. In: *The Palgrave handbook of the history of human sciences*. Singapore: Springer Singapore; 2022. p. 1-24.
15. Ramabai P. *The high-caste Hindu woman*. Oxford University Press; 2000. (Original work published 1887).
16. Rege S. *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonios*. Zubaan; 2013.
17. Santos BdS. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge; 2014.
18. Shinde T. A comparison between women and men (Stree purush tulana). In: Rege R, editor. *Writing caste/writing gender*. Zubaan; 1994. (Original work published 1882).
19. Smith LT. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. Zed Books; 1999.
20. Spivak GC. Can the subaltern speak? In: Nelson C, Grossberg L, editors. *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. University of Illinois Press; 1988. p. 271–313.
21. Tuhiwai Smith L. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. 2nd ed. Zed Books; 2012.