



REIMAGINING EDUCATION THROUGH INDIGENOUS WISDOM: A REVIEW OF THE PARROT'S TRAINING BY G. N. DEVY

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ABSTRACT

Education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge; it also involves developing critical consciousness, creativity, and cultural identity. In *The Parrot's Training* (2022), the distinguished Indian scholar and literary critic G. N. Devy traces the historical and philosophical background of education in India. Drawing on Rabindranath Tagore's fictional story, "The Parrot's Training," he critiques the colonial inheritance shaping today's educational institutions. He argues that the present system fosters rote learning, uniform assessment, and bureaucratic control over imagination, experiential learning, and cultural diversity. Using a multidisciplinary approach, he advocates an education system based on indigenous knowledge systems, linguistic plurality, and humanistic values. This article critically reviews the book's central arguments, thematic concerns, and contemporary relevance to debates over the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Overall, *The Parrot's Training* represents a significant contribution to contemporary educational thought, particularly for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking culturally responsive alternatives to conventional pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Education, Indigenous Knowledge, Colonial Education, NEP 2020, and Language Diversity

Introduction

Education has traditionally been the cornerstone of building societies, preserving cultures, and encouraging intellectual growth. However, modern

educational systems are often criticised for creating a climate that values examinations, memorisation, and standardisation over creativity and holistic development. In this light, debates about

educational reform in India have become more heated as concerns about the relevance of colonial school structures in a fast-changing world have increased.

G. N. Devy's *The Parrot's Training* is thus a timely intervention in this debate. Taking its name from Rabindranath Tagore's famous satirical tale, it questions prevailing educational practices and calls for a return to learner-centered, culturally responsive, and knowledge-rich pedagogies. The author discusses the effects of the colonial interjection on the Indigenous education tradition and then asks whether present-day institutions continue to represent some of the same forms of intellectual incarceration. The paper also examines the book's major themes, evaluates its strengths and limitations, and considers its relevance to contemporary debates in educational research and policy.

Aim of the Study

The study aims to critically examine G. N. Devy's *The Parrot's Training* (2022) as a contribution to contemporary debates in education, with particular attention to its critique of colonial and standardised educational practices, its advocacy of indigenous knowledge and linguistic diversity, and its relationship with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It also interprets Devy's use of Tagore's allegory as a means of questioning

assumptions about knowledge, learning, creativity, and educational authority.

Objectives of the Study

- To critically examine G. N. Devy's interpretation of Tagore's *The Parrot's Training* as a critique of conventional and colonial models of education.
- To analyse Devy's critique of rote learning, standardisation, examination-oriented education, and bureaucratic control.
- To examine the significance of indigenous knowledge systems and culturally rooted learning in Devy's educational thought.
- To explore the relationship between language, cultural identity, and education, with particular reference to multilingual and mother-tongue learning.
- To analyse Devy's emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, learner autonomy, and humanistic values in education.
- To examine the points of convergence and tension between Devy's educational ideas and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.
- To critically evaluate the strengths, limitations, and contemporary relevance of *The Parrot's Training* within the broader discourse on educational reform.



Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative approach based on textual and interpretive analysis. The primary texts are G. N. Devy's *The Parrot's Training* (2022) and Rabindranath Tagore's allegorical story "The Parrot's Training." Through close reading, the study identifies key images, narrative contrasts, and representations of authority, knowledge, discipline, and learner agency. The observations are organised thematically under colonial education, indigenous knowledge, language, creativity and standardisation, and human values.

The study also employs contextual and comparative reading by engaging with relevant scholarship, including the work of Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, Krishna Kumar, Martha C. Nussbaum, Michael Young, and UNESCO. NEP 2020 is treated as a policy context rather than as evidence for Devy's arguments. Its principles concerning conceptual understanding, experiential learning, creativity, critical thinking, multilingualism, local context, and Indian knowledge systems are compared with themes identified through textual analysis (Ministry of Education, 2020). The study does not empirically measure the implementation of NEP 2020; rather, it evaluates points of convergence and tension between the policy's aims and Devy's educational vision.

About the Author

Ganesh Narayandas Devy, popularly known as G. N. Devy, is one of India's most distinguished literary scholars, cultural critics, and language activists. He is widely recognized for his contributions to the preservation of India's linguistic diversity through initiatives such as the People's Linguistic Survey of India. Devy's academic work consistently emphasizes cultural plurality, indigenous knowledge traditions, and the democratization of education.

His extensive engagement with marginalized communities and endangered languages informs the intellectual framework of *The Parrot's Training*. Consequently, the book reflects not only scholarly rigor but also practical insights derived from decades of fieldwork and educational activism.

Overview of the Book

The Parrot's Training draws upon Tagore's allegory in which a king seeks to educate a parrot. Rather than nurturing the bird's natural abilities, scholars and administrators imprison it in a golden cage and force-feed it books. The parrot eventually dies, while the authorities continue to celebrate the apparent success of their educational project.

The allegory functions as a metaphor for educational systems that privilege conformity over understanding. Devy argues that institutions can

reproduce similar practices when learning is reduced to mechanical processes, examination performance, and institutional compliance (Devy, 2022). The book addresses educational philosophy, cultural memory, language, knowledge production, and pedagogical transformation, presenting education as a possible means of either liberation or intellectual domestication.

Major Themes

1. Critique of Colonial Education

One of the book's central arguments is that colonial educational models continue to influence contemporary schooling. Devy contends that colonial institutions were designed largely to produce clerical and bureaucratic functionaries rather than independent and creative thinkers (Devy, 2022).

He further argues that systems organised around discipline, hierarchy, and uniformity marginalised local knowledge and devalued indigenous modes of learning. Their persistence, in his view, restricts the transformative possibilities of postcolonial education (Devy, 2022). Educational success therefore needs to be considered beyond examinations and certification to include critical thinking, ethical awareness, and social responsibility.

Devy's argument can be situated alongside broader critiques of institutionalised education. Freire's emphasis on dialogue and critical

consciousness provides a framework for distinguishing participatory education from one-way transmission (Freire, 2018). Illich similarly questions systems that confuse institutional provision with genuine learning (Illich, 2000), while Kumar's discussion of curricular selection draws attention to the forms of knowledge educational institutions choose to privilege (Kumar, 2019). Devy's distinctive contribution lies in the importance he assigns to Indian cultural memory, linguistic plurality, and indigenous knowledge.

2. Indigenous Knowledge Systems

A significant contribution of the book is its emphasis on indigenous knowledge traditions. Devy argues that traditional communities possess ecological, cultural, and philosophical knowledge that remains insufficiently represented in formal curricula (Devy, 2022). He advocates the inclusion of local histories, folk traditions, oral narratives, and community practices within educational frameworks, arguing that such inclusion can enrich learning and strengthen cultural confidence (Devy, 2022).

By recognising indigenous knowledge as a legitimate form of intellectual inquiry, Devy challenges the dominance of narrowly defined epistemological models and calls for a more inclusive educational paradigm (Devy, 2022). Young's discussion of knowledge and curriculum is relevant here



because it draws attention to how knowledge is selected and organised within educational institutions (Young, 2008). Devy extends this debate by foregrounding Indian linguistic, cultural, and community-based forms of knowledge.

3. Language and Learning

Language occupies a central position in Devy's educational philosophy. He argues that learning becomes more meaningful when it occurs through languages familiar to learners and treats India's linguistic diversity as an educational resource rather than an obstacle (Devy, 2022). His emphasis on mother-tongue and regional-language learning is closely connected to cultural continuity, accessibility, and democratic participation.

This position has a direct policy parallel in NEP 2020. The policy states that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction should be the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language at least until Grade 5 and preferably until Grade 8 (Ministry of Education, 2020, Section 4.11).

4. Creativity versus Standardization

A further common theme is the conflict between creativity and standardization. Devy states that having an excessive reliance on exams and standardized testing tends to discourage imagination and independent thinking. (Devy, 2022)

It is common for students to act as passive receivers of information rather than taking an active role in creating knowledge. The author supports teaching methods which promote questioning, experimentation, discussion, and reflection. This kind of approach is in keeping with progressive educational beliefs that see learning as a dynamic and participatory process not merely as the mechanical transmission of information. (Devy, 2022)

The way Tagore describes the bird's wings being clipped gives a very clear expression of the issue in question. The bird's natural behaviour is called "reprehensible" and its attempt to peck at the cage is seen as "impertinence". The language here reverses the idea of freedom: natural curiosity is regarded as misconduct while obedience is presented as progress. Devy's criticism may therefore be seen as a plea for restoring educational methods which encourage questioning, experimentation, dialogue and independent thought rather than viewing learner autonomy as a threat to the established order.

This concern is also in line with Nussbaum's argument for types of education which develop the capacities needed for democratic participation and for human flourishing (Nussbaum, 2010). Making the comparison helps to explain why creativity and critical thinking should not be seen as optional extras in education

but should rather be regarded as essential aspects of meaningful learning..

5. Education and Human Values

Throughout the book, Devy emphasises the ethical dimensions of education. He argues that educational institutions should cultivate empathy, compassion, social responsibility, and respect for cultural diversity alongside cognitive abilities (Devy, 2022). In societies facing environmental degradation, social inequality, and cultural fragmentation, education must prepare not only skilled professionals but also responsible citizens capable of contributing to collective well-being.

This humanistic dimension prevents Devy's critique from being reduced to questions of curriculum or teaching technique. It presents education as an ethical relationship involving dignity, empathy, social responsibility, and cultural respect. This position is consistent with broader humanistic concerns in Nussbaum's work and UNESCO's call for a renewed social contract for education (Nussbaum, 2010; UNESCO, 2021).

Relevance to Contemporary Indian Education

The publication of *The Parrot's Training* coincides with significant developments in Indian educational policy, particularly the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Several of Devy's central claims resonate with the stated objectives of the NEP 2020, but the resonance is closer on some points than on others. Rather than list the parallels in the abstract, the discussion below reads the book's arguments against specific, numbered sections of the policy text.

On language, Devy's insistence that learning is meaningful only in languages familiar to learners corresponds closely to Section 4.11 of the NEP 2020, which directs that, wherever possible, the medium of school instruction should remain the child's home language, mother tongue, or regional language at least until Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8, with Sections 4.12 and 4.13 further framing early multilingual exposure and a flexible three-language formula as means of protecting both cognitive development and linguistic diversity (National Education Policy, secs. 4.11-4.13). On this theme, the book and the policy are substantively convergent.

On indigenous knowledge, Devy's advocacy for oral traditions, folk knowledge, and community-based learning finds a policy correlate in Section 4.27, which commits the school curriculum to incorporating tribal knowledge and indigenous ways of learning across subjects ranging from mathematics and astronomy to agriculture and governance (National Education Policy, sec. 4.27). The



overlap is real, but a precise comparison also has to register a difference in framing: the NEP presents this material chiefly as 'Indian Knowledge Systems' rooted substantially in classical and Sanskrit traditions, whereas Devy's own record of work, most visibly the People's Linguistic Survey of India, foregrounds tribal, oral, and minority-language traditions that sit outside that classical canon. A fuller comparison than the book itself offers would need to distinguish the policy's civilisational framing of indigenous knowledge from Devy's more explicitly subaltern one.

On standardisation, the correspondence is more limited than a simple list of shared keywords suggests. NEP 2020 does commit, in Sections 4.4 and 4.5, to moving away from the culture of rote learning and toward competency-based, inquiry-driven pedagogy, and Sections 4.6 to 4.9 make experiential and arts-integrated learning the default pedagogy at every stage (National Education Policy, secs. 4.4-4.9). Yet the same policy retains Board examinations in Grades 10 and 12, a National Testing Agency for university entrance, and standardised school examinations at Grades 3, 5, and 8 (National Education Policy, secs. 4.34-4.42). Devy's critique of examination-driven schooling as a colonial inheritance therefore applies, with real force, to structures the NEP itself leaves

substantially in place even as it revises their content and framing. Treating the book and the policy as simply aligned understates this tension.

The book therefore serves as both a resource that supports several NEP objectives and, at the same time, an implicit challenge to the parts of the assessment architecture the policy has not yet dismantled. For teacher educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers, Devy's insights offer valuable guidance for translating educational ideals into meaningful practice, provided that guidance is read alongside the specific provisions, and the specific continuities, of the policy itself.

Critical Evaluation

1. Strengths

i) Intellectual Depth

The greatest strength of the book is its intellectual richness. Devy draws upon history, philosophy, literature, linguistics, and cultural studies to construct a multidimensional critique of education.

ii) Cultural Relevance

The book successfully situates educational debates within the Indian context rather than merely borrowing international theories. Devy engages deeply with indigenous intellectual traditions and cultural realities

iii) Accessibility

Despite addressing complex theoretical issues, the author's writing

remains accessible. The use of Tagore's allegory provides a compelling narrative framework that enhances reader engagement.

iv) Interdisciplinary Perspective

The integration of multiple disciplines strengthens the book's analytical scope and enables readers to appreciate education as a complex social and cultural phenomenon.

2. Limitations

i) Limited Practical Frameworks

While Devy effectively critiques existing systems, the book offers relatively fewer concrete strategies for implementing large-scale educational reforms. Educators seeking detailed pedagogical models may find some recommendations insufficiently developed.

ii) Idealistic Vision

Certain proposals regarding the integration of indigenous knowledge and linguistic diversity may face practical challenges in highly standardized educational environments. Issues related to teacher training, curriculum design, and assessment requires more extensive consideration.

iii) Broad Generalizations

At times, the critique of colonial education appears somewhat generalized. A more nuanced discussion of contemporary educational innovations could have strengthened the analysis. Despite these limitations, the

book's contributions substantially outweigh its shortcomings.

Contribution to Educational Scholarship

The Parrot's Training contributes to contemporary discussions of decolonisation, cultural diversity, language policy, and learner-centred pedagogy. It encourages educators to move beyond narrow conceptions of academic achievement and to consider questions of human flourishing, cultural preservation, democratic participation, and the social purposes of education.

By foregrounding indigenous perspectives, Devy broadens educational discourse and challenges dominant assumptions about knowledge and learning. The work is particularly relevant to researchers interested in postcolonial studies, comparative education, curriculum theory, language, and cultural pedagogy.

Conclusion

G. N. Devy's *The Parrot's Training* makes a significant contribution to contemporary debates on education. Through its engagement with Tagore's allegory, the book exposes the limitations of educational systems that privilege obedience, rote learning, examination performance, and administrative efficiency over creativity, critical thinking, cultural connection, and learner agency.

The book's emphasis on indigenous knowledge, linguistic diversity, and humanistic values offers a culturally



grounded perspective on educational reform. Its relationship with NEP 2020 is both complementary and critical: several policy objectives correspond with Devy's concerns, while continuing standardised assessment structures reveal unresolved tensions. Although the book offers fewer detailed strategies for large-scale implementation, its central arguments encourage sustained reflection on the purposes of education and the forms of knowledge that institutions value.

For educators, researchers, policymakers, and students of education, *The Parrot's Training* provides a valuable framework for rethinking teaching and learning in a culturally diverse and democratic society. Its central reminder is that education should cultivate the capacity to think, create, question, and participate meaningfully in the world.

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