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## **EDUCATION AS NATIONAL REGENERATION: LALA LAJPAT RAI'S WRITINGS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY INDIAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Lala Lajpat Rai's conception of "national education" as a project of national regeneration and explores its relevance for contemporary Indian educational reform, especially the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). Anchored in a close reading of *The Problem of National Education in India* (1920) and related writings, the study reconstructs Rai's multi-layered critique of colonial education as producing clericalism, economic dependence, psychological inferiority, and cultural alienation, and shows how he links these effects to the wider logic of imperial domination. It then analyses his positive programme of national education—rooted in Indian civilization yet open to modern science—centered on moral-character formation, vocational and technical training, women's education, and democratic citizenship, while also acknowledging limits in his treatment of caste, gender, and religious pluralism. Methodologically, the paper combines intellectual history and qualitative textual analysis with a thematic reading of NEP 2020 and recent decolonization debates. It argues that Rai offers an early Indian theory of colonial power through education and a demanding normative framework for judging whether contemporary reforms, including NEP 2020's emphasis on Indian ethos, Indian Knowledge Systems, and skilling, genuinely move beyond colonial logics or risk reproducing them in new forms.

**Keywords:** Lala Lajpat Rai; national education; colonial education in India; national regeneration; decolonizing education; National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020); Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS); Arya Samaj and D.A.V. institutions; moral and character education; vocational and technical education.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Lala Lajpat Rai's *The Problem of National Education in India* (1920) offers one of the earliest systematic Indian attempts to theorize education as the central instrument of national regeneration. In chapters such as "National Education: Introductory," "National Ideals," "Broad Aims of Indian Education," and "The Problem," he argues that colonial rule has weakened Indian society intellectually, morally, and psychologically, and that political freedom is impossible without an educational system rooted in India's own civilization and collective aspirations (Rai, 1920, pp. 9–13, 18–23, 57–60, 70–73). For Lajpat Rai, education must arise from the "life of the nation," cultivate national character, and harmonize Indian traditions with modern scientific and industrial progress (Rai, 1920, pp. 23–30, 67–70).

A century later, India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) explicitly speaks of creating an education system "rooted in Indian ethos" that will transform India into a "vibrant knowledge society and global knowledge superpower," combining holistic development, vocational emphasis, and a renewed place for Indian knowledge systems (Government of India, 2020, p. 1; Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 4). At the same time, a growing body of scholarship reads NEP 2020 and related reforms through the lens of "decolonizing" education, asking whether these initiatives genuinely overcome colonial

legacies in curriculum, language, and pedagogy or simply repackage older structures in nationalist terms (Bhagat, 2024, p. 1586; “Decolonizing education: NEP 2020 and the renaissance of India’s indigenous knowledge systems,” 2024, pp. 2–4). Against this backdrop, Lajpat Rai’s early twentieth-century vision of education as national regeneration offers a historically grounded framework for interrogating contemporary reform (Rai, 1920, pp. 9–13, 18–23, 33–37).

This paper takes Lajpat Rai’s 1920 text as its primary anchor and asks three interrelated research questions. First, how does Lajpat Rai conceptualize “national education” as a project of national regeneration in the specific context of colonial India, particularly in relation to national character, patriotism, intellectual independence, vocational training, and social unity (Rai, 1920, pp. 18–23, 37–42, 57–60, 64–70)? Second, in what ways does his critique of colonial education—as producing cultural alienation, clericalism, economic dependence, and psychological inferiority—anticipate or differ from contemporary discourses on decolonizing Indian education (Rai, 1920, pp. 13–18, 70–81; Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1583–1584)? Third, how can Lajpat Rai’s categories of national education, moral-character formation, scientific and technical training, women’s education, and democratic citizenship be mobilized as an analytic lens for assessing NEP 2020 and related reform initiatives today (Rai, 1920, pp. 23–30, 37–42, 57–70; Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 4–6; Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1584–1586)?

## 2. SOURCES AND APPROACH

This paper is based primarily on Lala Lajpat Rai’s own writings on education and national regeneration, with particular emphasis on *The Problem of National Education in India* (1920) as his most systematic statement on the subject (Rai, 1920). The analysis also draws on a set of related texts—*The Arya Samaj* (1915), *The United States of America: A Hindu’s Impressions and a Study* (1916), *England’s Debt to India* (1917), *Young India* (1919), *The Ideals of Non-Cooperation* (1921), *Unhappy India* (1928), *The Political Situation in India* (n.d.), and selected essays and speeches in *The Collected Works of Lala Lajpat Rai*—which develop and apply his educational ideas in different genres and contexts (Rai, 1907/1965, pp. 15–21, 37–46; Rai, 1915, pp. 55–61, 140–154, 219–232; Rai, 1916, pp. 35–42, 85–92, 154–162; Rai, 1917, pp. 102–118; Rai, 1919, pp. 190–197; Rai, 1920, pp. 6–14, 57–70; Rai, 1921, pp. 52–56, 58–63, 73–75; Rai, 1928, pp. 41–48; Rai, n.d., pp. 22–27, 72–79).

These primary sources are read in conjunction with key biographical and interpretive studies, especially Feroz Chand’s *Lajpat Rai: Life and Work* and Purushottam Nagar’s *Lala Lajpat Rai: The Man and His Ideas*, which help situate Lajpat Rai’s educational thought within the Arya Samaj, the D.A.V. movement, and the wider currents of Indian nationalism (Chand, 1978, pp. 42–49, 53–60; Nagar, n.d., pp. 9–15, 15–22). Recent scholarship such as Bhagat’s article on Lajpat Rai and national education is used both to cross-check interpretations and to connect the early twentieth-century debates to contemporary discussions of NEP 2020 and decolonizing Indian education (Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1582–1586).

Methodologically, the study adopts an intellectual-historical and qualitative textual approach. It reads Lajpat Rai’s writings diachronically—from his early Arya Samaj essays and American travelogue through his 1920 treatise and later political books—in order to trace both continuities and shifts in his conception of colonial education, national education, and social reform. Genre differences between polemical pamphlets, political speeches, travel observations, and systematic treatises are noted but not treated as obstacles: instead, they are used to show how a consistent set of educational concerns is refracted through different rhetorical and institutional situations. The analysis identifies and compares recurring

themes—such as clericalism, cultural alienation, vocational and technical education, moral character, women’s education, and citizenship—and then uses these themes as analytical categories to read the National Education Policy 2020 and contemporary decolonization debates.

### 3. LAJPAT RAI’S CRITIQUE OF COLONIAL EDUCATION AND NATIONAL AWAKENING

Across his writings, Lala Lajpat Rai developed a sustained and multi-layered indictment of the British colonial system of education in India. In his essays and speeches collected in *The Collected Works of Lala Lajpat Rai*, he portrays colonial education as one of the principal causes of India’s intellectual and economic decline, arguing that it was expressly designed to serve imperial interests rather than the needs of Indian society, produced a class of clerks and subordinate officials instead of independent thinkers or nation-builders, and remained narrowly literary and examination-oriented, neglecting practical, technical, and industrial training (Rai, n.d., pp. 75–79). A similar interpretation appears in Feroz Chand’s biographical study, which emphasises that the British system encouraged imitation of Western ideas, weakened Indian cultural identity and national pride, and created intellectual dependence that obstructed economic and industrial progress (Chand, 1978, pp. 45–49).

Lajpat Rai repeatedly links this educational critique to broader structures of colonial political and economic domination. In *England’s Debt to India*, he argues that the colonial state extracted vast revenues from India while investing minimally in public welfare, including education; the resulting educational backwardness, he contends, was integrally connected to imperial economic exploitation and maintained India as a dependent market by discouraging technical institutions, industrial training, and scientific education (Rai, 1917, pp. 107–118). In *The Problem of National Education in India*, he describes British educational policy as a limited, urban-elite system established primarily to produce office-seekers and lower administrative employees, thereby fostering clericalism, economic unproductiveness, and a dangerous disconnection between schools and the life of the masses (Rai, 1920, pp. 6–14, 70–79). The same themes recur in *The Political Situation in India* and *Unhappy India*, where he criticises colonial education for functioning as an instrument of imperial domination, producing imitation rather than originality, dependence rather than self-reliance, and maintaining mass illiteracy by restricting access to meaningful education (Rai, n.d., pp. 22–27; Rai, 1928, pp. 41–48).

Lajpat Rai also insists that colonial education was psychologically and culturally damaging. In *The Political Situation in India* and *Lajpat Rai: The Man and His Work*, he argues that British schools and colleges fostered admiration for Europe and contempt for India’s own civilization, thereby undermining self-confidence and alienating educated Indians from their society and traditions (Rai, n.d., pp. 22–27; Rai, 1907/1965, pp. 21–29). Purushottam Nagar’s *Lala Lajpat Rai: The Man and His Ideas* underscore this point, noting Lajpat Rai’s view that colonial education encouraged intellectual servility by discouraging originality, vocational skill, and pride in Indian civilisation (Nagar, n.d., pp. 15–22). In works such as *The United States of America* and *Ideals of Non-Cooperation*, Lajpat Rai reinforces his critique through comparison and political strategy: contrasting the democratic, mass-oriented, technically rich education he observed in the United States with the narrow, elitist, clerk-producing system in India, and arguing that British education created mental dependence and inferiority complexes while ignoring practical, technical, and vocational training (Rai, 1916, pp. 154–162; Rai, 1921, pp. 58–63).

Finally, in *The Arya Samaj* he explicitly connects colonial education's cultural consequences to the need for a national alternative. There he argues that English education had weakened Indian self-respect by encouraging admiration for Europe and contempt for indigenous civilisation, and that only an education rooted in Indian traditions and Vedic philosophy—yet open to modern science—could restore dignity, cultural confidence, and genuine intellectual independence (Rai, 1915, pp. 140–146, 147–154). Taken together, these texts show that Lajpat Rai's criticism of colonial education is not confined to a single work but constitutes a central strand of his nationalist thought, linking imperial educational policy to intellectual dependency, economic exploitation, social fragmentation, and the erosion of national self-respect.

Taken together, these strands show that Lajpat Rai offers more than a moral protest against British education; he advances a coherent theory of how colonial power operates through educational institutions. For him, schooling is a key mechanism by which empire manufactures a clerical intermediary class, extracts economic value, and reshapes the psychological dispositions of the colonized into imitation, passivity, and dependence (Rai, 1917, pp. 107–118; Rai, 1920, pp. 70–79; Rai, 1928, pp. 41–48). By repeatedly linking the production of “clerks and subordinate officials” to the drain of wealth, the neglect of vocational and technical training, and the glorification of Europe at the expense of India, he depicts colonial education as a total structure that simultaneously organizes labour markets, legitimizes economic exploitation, and erodes indigenous cultural capital (Rai, 1916, pp. 154–162; Rai, 1920, pp. 76–86; Rai, n.d., pp. 22–27). In this sense, his critique anticipates later postcolonial accounts of education as a site where colonial hegemony is reproduced not only through curriculum but also through aspirations, social stratification, and the very definition of “useful” knowledge (Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1582–1584).

#### **4. EDUCATION AS NATIONAL REGENERATION: CORE ELEMENTS**

Lala Lajpat Rai regarded education as the principal instrument of national regeneration and believed that no durable political freedom could be achieved without the intellectual and moral awakening of the people. In his view, India's weakness under colonial rule was not merely political; it was also psychological and educational, because the prevailing system had undermined confidence in indigenous civilization and reduced learning to a means of subordinate employment rather than national service. He therefore argued that education had to cultivate patriotism, self-respect, moral discipline, civic responsibility, and collective consciousness so that individuals could participate meaningfully in the reconstruction of the nation. Education, in this sense, was not simply a matter of literacy or scholastic advancement, but the process through which a society recovered its inner strength and prepared itself for self-government (Rai, n.d., pp. 72–75; Rai, 1917, pp. 102–107; Rai, 1920, pp. 9–13, 57–60; Rai, 1921, pp. 52–56, 73–75).

This conception is reinforced across biographical and interpretive writings on Lajpat Rai, which portray him as viewing education as the foundation of national life, democratic citizenship, and social reconstruction. He consistently linked educational reform with the restoration of self-confidence, public duty, and national dignity, and maintained that a morally conscious and educated population was essential for political progress. His reflections on modern democratic societies further strengthened this belief by showing that widespread education produced civic discipline, political participation, and collective advancement, whereas its neglect in colonial India perpetuated dependency and backwardness. Taken together, these writings show that Lajpat Rai conceived education as the central means through which India could overcome colonial subordination and rebuild itself as a self-aware, morally grounded, and politically capable nation (Chand, 1978, pp. 42–45; Rai, 1907/1965,

pp. 15–21; Nagar, n.d., pp. 9–15; Rai, 1915, pp. 55–61; Rai, 1916, pp. 35–42, 85–92; Rai, 1919, pp. 190–197).

Read synoptically, Lajpat Rai’s “national education” emerges as a distinctive nationalist pedagogy that seeks to reverse each of these colonial effects by re-orienting the purposes, content, and social location of education. Against the clerical, exam-centered and urban-elite model of colonial schooling, he proposes an education rooted in the “life of the nation,” aimed at character formation, civic responsibility, and economic self-reliance, and accessible beyond narrow middle-class publics (Rai, 1920, pp. 9–13, 57–67; Rai, 1921, pp. 52–56, 73–75). In contrast to Rabindranath Tagore’s more cosmopolitan, world-citizen educational ideal and Gandhi’s village-centered *Nai Talim*, which emphasized productive manual labour in the primary school itself, Lajpat Rai’s approach remains more explicitly oriented to building a territorially bounded, industrially competent nation-state and to forging a disciplined citizenry for representative self-government (Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1584–1586). Where colonial education, in his view, created a weak and derivative intelligentsia, national education is intended to generate morally anchored, technically skilled, and nationally conscious citizens capable of exercising *swaraj* responsibly and sustaining democratic institutions over time (Chand, 1978, pp. 42–45, 57–60; Rai, 1915, pp. 55–61, 147–154; Rai, 1916, pp. 35–42, 85–92).

Although comprehensive in many respects, Lajpat Rai’s framework is not without limitations. His discussions of national education rarely address caste and untouchability in a systematic way, tending instead to assume that moral uplift and patriotic sentiment will suffice to overcome entrenched social hierarchies (Rai, 1920, pp. 57–60; Rai, 1919, pp. 190–197). Similarly, while he forcefully defends women’s education, he often envisages women primarily as moral guardians in the domestic and social sphere rather than as fully equal participants in all domains of public life (Rai, 1915, pp. 55–61, 140–146; Chand, 1978, pp. 66–68). His model of national education is also framed within a reformist Hindu, Arya Samaj idiom, raising questions about how far it can be generalized to India’s religiously plural society without modification (Rai, 1915, pp. 147–154; Nagar, n.d., pp. 9–15). Recognizing these silences is essential for any attempt to draw on his thought in the context of contemporary debates on equality, social justice, and inclusive citizenship.

## 5. INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIMENTS IN ‘NATIONAL EDUCATION’

Lala Lajpat Rai’s educational thought was strongly shaped by the reformist influence of the Arya Samaj, which led him to view education as a means of moral regeneration and social reform. He believed that ignorance, superstition, and intellectual stagnation had weakened Indian society, and therefore education had to cultivate discipline, patriotism, rationality, and social responsibility alongside intellectual growth. In this sense, education was not limited to classroom learning; it was a national instrument for rebuilding character and awakening collective self-confidence. Lajpat Rai also emphasized that national progress depended on enlightened citizens capable of combining moral strength with civic duty, making education central to the broader project of national reconstruction (Rai, 1915, pp. 55–61; Rai, 1907/1965, pp. 37–46).

A significant nuance in Lajpat Rai’s position was his insistence on balancing Indian cultural traditions with modern knowledge. He supported educational institutions associated with the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic movement because they sought to combine Indian values with modern scientific education, discipline, and intellectual development. Lajpat Rai regarded such institutions as practical models of national education because they preserved cultural self-respect while preparing students for modern life. He opposed blind imitation of the West, yet he did not reject modern learning; instead, he advocated a synthesis of Vedic ethics,

Indian philosophy, and modern subjects so that education could produce individuals who were intellectually capable, morally grounded, and nationally conscious (Rai, 1915, pp. 140–154, 219–232).

## **6. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

The National Education Policy 2020 provides a concrete contemporary context in which to test the analytic value of Lajpat Rai's educational ideas. In its Vision statement, the policy speaks of creating an education system "rooted in Indian ethos" that will contribute to transforming India into an "equitable and vibrant knowledge society" and a "global knowledge superpower," and explicitly calls for the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into curricula across disciplines (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 4–6). This language appears to resonate strongly with Lajpat Rai's insistence that national education must arise from the life of the nation, restore cultural self-respect, and encourage serious engagement with Indian intellectual traditions alongside modern science (Rai, 1915, pp. 140–146, 147–154; Rai, 1920, pp. 23–30, 33–37). At the same time, recent analyses of NEP 2020's IKS agenda suggest that institutionalising "Indian ethos" in textbooks and programmes is not the same as achieving the deeper mental decolonisation and intellectual independence that Rai regarded as essential; policies may cite indigenous knowledge while still leaving intact hierarchical pedagogies and uncritical admiration for Western models (Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1584–1586; "Decolonizing education: NEP 2020 and the renaissance of India's indigenous knowledge systems," 2024, pp. 2–4).

NEP 2020 also places strong emphasis on vocational education, skill development, and flexible, multidisciplinary pathways—through provisions for multiple entry–exit options, a higher education credit framework, and the mainstreaming of vocational exposure in school curricula (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 10–13, 36–40; Government of India, 2020, p. 1). These elements appear to echo Lajpat Rai's long-standing criticism of literary, exam-centred, clerical education and his demand for practical, technical and industrial training oriented to national economic self-reliance (Rai, 1917, pp. 107–118; Rai, 1920, pp. 57–60, 67–70; Rai, 1921, pp. 58–63). Yet, as decolonisation-oriented critiques point out, a skills-heavy agenda can also be captured by market logics and remain disconnected from the moral, civic, and cultural aims of national education that Lajpat Rai considered indispensable (Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1583–1586; "Decolonizing education: NEP 2020 and the renaissance of India's indigenous knowledge systems," 2024, pp. 5–7). From his perspective, vocational and multidisciplinary reforms without a concomitant emphasis on character formation, civic responsibility, and critical engagement with India's own civilisational traditions would risk reproducing a new, technically efficient but still dependent elite.

## **7. LALA LAJPAT RAI'S RELEVANCE TODAY: ANALYTICAL DIALOGUE**

Lala Lajpat Rai's educational thought remains highly relevant in contemporary debates on Indian education because he treated education not as a narrow academic exercise but as a foundation for national reconstruction, civic responsibility, and cultural self-respect. His insistence that education must be rooted in the life of the nation, combine moral formation with intellectual development, and prepare citizens for self-government speaks directly to present concerns about the purpose of schooling in a postcolonial democracy. In this sense, Lajpat Rai's critique of colonial education continues to provide a useful framework for understanding why education in India must balance modern knowledge, social inclusion, and national identity (Rai, 1920, pp. 9–13, 57–60; Rai, 1915, pp. 55–61; Rai, 1917, pp. 102–107).

At the same time, current educational reform debates show that many of the issues Lajpat Rai identified have not disappeared, even if their institutional forms have changed. The emphasis

in NEP 2020 on holistic learning, vocational education, and Indian knowledge systems signals a desire to design an education system that is both modern and nationally grounded, yet controversies around implementation, market-orientation, and the depth of “Indianization” indicate that the tensions between imitation and independence, clericalism and self-reliance, remain unresolved (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020, pp. 4–6, 10–13; Bhagat, 2024, pp. 1584–1586). Similarly, contemporary decolonization initiatives extend Lajpat Rai’s concerns about cultural alienation but also raise questions he largely left implicit, especially regarding caste hierarchies, religious pluralism, and gendered roles within national education. His relevance today therefore lies not only in offering a historical model to emulate, but in providing a demanding benchmark against which to measure how far present reforms actually move beyond colonial logics in the organization of knowledge, social power, and citizenship.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Lala Lajpat Rai’s educational thought was not a marginal part of his nationalism but one of its central foundations. Across his writings, he consistently argued that colonial rule had damaged India not only politically but also intellectually, morally, and psychologically, and that any meaningful struggle for freedom had to begin with the reconstruction of the mind and character of the people. Education, for Lajpat Rai, was therefore a national and civilizational project: it had to arise from the life of the nation, cultivate patriotism, self-respect, civic duty, and moral discipline, and prepare Indians for self-government through a balance of cultural rootedness and modern scientific and technical progress.

Lajpat Rai’s critique of colonial education remains historically significant because it connects clericalism, imitation, dependence, and cultural alienation to the larger logic of empire. At the same time, his positive vision goes beyond criticism by offering a constructive model of national education grounded in Indian traditions, social reform, and disciplined citizenship. His support for Arya Samaj educational experiments and for institutions that combined Indian values with modern learning shows that he was not rejecting modernity, but seeking to indigenize it. This makes his work especially valuable for understanding present debates about the purpose of education in India.

Lajpat Rai adds two important things to contemporary theory and policy debates. First, he provides a powerful historical argument that education must be judged not only by enrollment, skills, or employability, but also by its capacity to form self-aware, morally responsible, and socially committed citizens. Second, he offers an early Indian framework for thinking about decolonisation in education: not as a mere slogan, but as a deep transformation of curriculum, values, and purpose. In relation to NEP 2020, Lajpat Rai’s relevance lies in the tension his thought helps illuminate—between modernization and rootedness, flexibility and character formation, technical training and ethical development, national identity and openness to change. His writings therefore remain useful not simply as historical evidence, but as an enduring analytical guide for thinking about what Indian education should be, whom it should serve, and what kind of nation it should help build.

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