



Colonial Burden On The English Literature Syllabus In Indian Universities: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: The Paper looks at how the English literature syllabus in Indian universities is still heavily influenced by the country's colonial past. Even today, most courses give more importance to British writers and Western ideas, while Indian and regional voices are often pushed to the side or offered only as optional papers. By studying different university syllabus, this paper shows how the structure of the courses, the choice of texts, and the way students are assessed still follow patterns set during colonial times. Although recent discussions talk about "decolonising" education, real change has been slow because the basic framework of the syllabus has not been updated. This study explains why this colonial burden continues and suggests practical steps universities can take to make the English syllabus more inclusive, balanced, and relevant for Indian students today.

Introduction

English studies in India began during the British colonial period, when English education was introduced mainly to support the administrative and cultural needs of the colonial government. Although India gained independence decades ago, many of the academic structures created during that time have continued without major change. As a result, English literature remains a very popular discipline in Indian universities, but its foundation still carries the influence of colonial thinking. The syllabus in many institutions continues to highlight British canonical writers as the core focus, while Indian, regional, and marginalized voices appear far less often or are included only as optional papers.

Review of Literature

Research on English literature syllabus in Indian universities consistently reveals a set of long-standing problems. The most visible issue is that British canonical authors continue to dominate core courses, shaping what students are expected to read and value. This leaves limited space for Indian writers, as well as for Dalit, Adivasi, women, and other marginalized voices, who are often placed in elective or peripheral papers instead of being included in the main curriculum. In addition, many universities still follow examination patterns inherited from the colonial period, relying heavily on memorisation-based assessments and fixed interpretations rather than encouraging critical thinking, cultural awareness, or comparative approaches. Although recent curriculum reforms have introduced postcolonial studies, Indian English literature, and regional texts, these additions often function as supplementary units rather than meaningful alternatives to the British core. As a result, the overall structure of English studies continues to reflect a colonial mindset. This ongoing imbalance highlights the need for systematic reforms that make the syllabus more representative, inclusive, and relevant for contemporary Indian students.

Objectives of the Study

1. Examine colonial influence in English literature syllabus.
2. Analyse representation of British, Indian, and regional writers.
3. Identify reasons behind slow decolonisation.
4. Suggest practical steps for reform.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do syllabi prioritise British canonical literature?
2. How are Indian and regional writers represented?
3. What colonial teaching practices persist?
4. What steps can support meaningful decolonisation?

Methodology

A qualitative descriptive approach was used,

Samples of syllabus was taken from Central, State, and Private universities.

Both undergraduate (BA English) and postgraduate (MA English) programmes were included.

Syllabus were examined for:

Core text selection

Elective offerings

Course descriptions

Assessment patterns

Patterns were identified and compared to evaluate the presence of colonial influence.

This paper does not aim to provide statistical generalisation but offers a conceptual and representative view of syllabus patterns.

Findings and Discussion

Dominance of British canon, limited Indian voices, Colonial Periodisation and Course Design, exam-heavy assessment, and superficial reforms were identified. While some progress exists, meaningful structural change remains slow.

1 Dominance of British Canon

Across most syllabus, the core papers are still centred on British literature. Common required units include:

British Poetry (Chaucer to Romantic Age)

British Drama (Shakespeare, Shaw)

British Fiction (Austen, Dickens, Hardy)

Modern British Literature (20th century)

These occupy the largest credit share, pushing other literatures to the margins.

2 Limited Representation of Indian and Regional Voices

Indian writers in English—Tagore, R. K. Narayan, Toru Dutt, Kamala Das—do appear, but often as small units or optional modules.

Regional literatures in translation and Dalit/Adivasi writings are even less represented.

3 Colonial Periodisation and Course Design

Most syllabi still use British chronological divisions (e.g., “Elizabethan Age,” “Romantic Age”), reflecting a worldview centred on British history. Indian and global time periods are rarely used as primary organising principles.

4 Assessment Practices Remain Colonial

Universities continue to follow exam-heavy, memory-based assessment systems. Critical thinking, research-based assignments, and creative responses—common in decolonised pedagogy—are less common.

5 Slow Progress Towards Decolonisation

While some syllabi now include:

Postcolonial literature, Gender studies, Dalit literature, Translation studies; these usually appear as electives rather than core components. The basic structure remains unchanged, showing that reforms are largely cosmetic.

Reasons for Persistent Colonial Burden

Historical inertia – University departments repeat old syllabi with minor changes.

Lack of faculty training in Indian and regional literatures – Many teachers were trained in colonial syllabi themselves.

Textbook market pressure – Widely available British-canon textbooks shape what is “easy to teach.”

Institutional conservatism – Universities avoid major curriculum overhaul because it requires approval from multiple bodies.

Fear of losing “global standards” – Some institutions wrongly assume that reducing British texts weakens academic quality.

Recommendations

Restructure Core Papers : Make Indian literature, regional literature in translation, and postcolonial literature part of the core, not optional.

Diversify Reading Lists

Contemporary global South voices

Reimagine Assessment

Promote Interdisciplinary Approaches

Encourage Faculty Development Workshops, seminars, and training in Indian and global South literatures can help teachers update their knowledge base.

Conclusion

The English literature syllabus in Indian universities continues to carry a colonial burden that shapes what is taught and how it is taught. Although independence brought political freedom, academic structures have not fully evolved. Real decolonisation requires more than adding a few new authors; it demands rethinking the entire framework of curriculum design. By restructuring core courses, improving representation, modernising assessment, and aligning content with Indian social realities, universities can create an English syllabus that is relevant, inclusive, and intellectually empowering for learners in a postcolonial nation.

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