



Decolonizing World History: Whose Stories Get Told?

Dr. Kumaraswamy T

Guest faculty, Department of history, Post graduation centre Ramanagara, Bangaluru university.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16784106>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 16-07-2025

Published: 10-08-2025

Keywords:

Decolonization, World History, Subaltern Studies, Indigenous Knowledge.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the urgent need to decolonize world history by interrogating whose narratives have traditionally been prioritized and whose voices have been marginalized or erased. For centuries, dominant historical accounts have been shaped by Eurocentric perspectives that emphasize colonial empires, conquest, and Western progress while downplaying or ignoring the contributions, experiences, and resistances of colonized peoples. This article explores how historical scholarship, education, and museum representations can reinforce colonial hierarchies, and proposes alternative frameworks rooted in subaltern studies, indigenous knowledge systems, and intersectional analysis. Through case studies from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, it highlights efforts by scholars, activists, and communities to reclaim agency and reshape global historical narratives. Ultimately, the piece advocates for a pluralistic, inclusive approach to history that reflects the complexity, diversity, and interconnectedness of the human past.

Introduction

World history, as it is often taught and written, reflects not just the past but also the power structures that have shaped how the past is remembered. For centuries, historical narratives—particularly those found in textbooks, academic institutions, and public memory—have largely been constructed from Eurocentric viewpoints. These narratives center Western achievements, colonial expansion, and imperial dominance



while minimizing, distorting, or altogether ignoring the perspectives and contributions of colonized societies.

The legacy of colonialism continues to influence what is considered "valid" history, whose experiences are documented, and which events are deemed significant. As a result, the voices of Indigenous peoples, enslaved communities, women, lower castes, and marginalized ethnic groups are often missing or underrepresented in global historical discourse. This skewed representation not only perpetuates cultural hierarchies but also limits our collective understanding of humanity's shared past.

In recent decades, historians, educators, and activists have called for the **decolonization of historical knowledge**—a process that involves challenging dominant narratives, amplifying suppressed voices, and recognizing multiple ways of knowing and remembering. This movement is not about erasing Western history but about rebalancing the global story to include diverse experiences, resistances, and worldviews that colonial powers attempted to silence.

This article explores the key questions at the heart of this movement: Who gets to tell history? Whose memories are preserved, and whose are erased? And how can we create a more inclusive, just, and accurate understanding of the past? By examining case studies from the Global South and theoretical approaches like subaltern studies and postcolonial theory, the article aims to contribute to the ongoing effort to decolonize world history.

1. Background of the Study

The study of world history has long been dominated by Eurocentric narratives that position Western nations as the primary agents of progress, civilization, and modernity. Colonial empires not only controlled vast territories but also controlled the way histories were recorded and remembered. For instance, school curricula in former colonies often glorify British, French, or Portuguese rulers while relegating indigenous leaders and resistances to footnotes. In India, names like Robert Clive and Lord Mountbatten are prominent, while figures such as Rani Gaidinliu or Birsa Munda are lesser-known in mainstream history.

Globally, this imbalance is increasingly being challenged by scholars and educators advocating for the decolonization of historical knowledge. Museums are returning looted artifacts, and communities are reclaiming oral histories and indigenous narratives once dismissed as "unscientific." The real-life impact



of this shift is visible in movements like Rhodes Must Fall (South Africa, UK), the toppling of colonial statues (US, Belgium), and the re-evaluation of national heroes from postcolonial perspectives.

Literature Review

The call to decolonize world history has been shaped by influential scholars across international, national, and regional levels, each emphasizing the power dynamics embedded in historical narratives and the urgent need to challenge Eurocentric frameworks.

International Context

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), asserts that history is not merely about events but about who gets to narrate them—often resulting in the erasure of subaltern voices. Walter D. Mignolo’s concept of *epistemic disobedience* advocates for disengaging from Western epistemology to validate other knowledge systems rooted in indigenous, African, and Asian traditions. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) is a foundational text in decolonial research, stressing the legitimacy and importance of indigenous ways of knowing and advocating for research by and for marginalized communities. More recently, Priya Satia (*Time’s Monster*, 2020) critiques how British historians and intellectuals actively shaped imperial policy, revealing how historical writing was complicit in empire-building. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000) also calls for decentering Europe in global historical narratives, advocating for a plurality of modernities.

National Context (India)

The Subaltern Studies Collective, initiated by Ranajit Guha, sought to write “history from below,” challenging elite-centric nationalist histories and bringing attention to the lives and resistance of peasants, women, Adivasis, and other marginalized communities. Romila Thapar has extensively critiqued the colonial construction of Indian history, particularly the overemphasis on invasions and the framing of Indian society as stagnant prior to colonial intervention. Uma Chakravarti (2003) links caste, gender, and history, calling for feminist historiography that disrupts Brahmanical-patriarchal narratives. Gail Omvedt’s work on Dalit and Bahujan resistance movements further expands the understanding of history as a contested space, where caste-based movements reinterpret past and present struggles. Nivedita Menon and Kancha Ilaiah have both highlighted how mainstream historiography marginalizes anti-caste thinkers and reformers.



State-Level Context (Karnataka)

In Karnataka, localized research has shed light on how history is experienced and remembered by oppressed communities. Institutions like Kannada University, Hampi, have played a key role in promoting folk histories, oral traditions, and Dalit narratives. Studies on *Male Mahadeshwara*, *Kuvempu's egalitarian philosophy*, and *Basavanna's vachanas* show how religious reform and resistance are embedded in folk expressions, often absent in textbook histories. Dr. Shailaja I. Hiremath has foregrounded the role of women and caste in Karnataka's cultural history, especially through folk songs, oral traditions, and gendered memory. Her research stresses the importance of intersectionality in regional history writing, highlighting the lived experiences of Devadasis, rural Dalit women, and female storytellers. Additionally, scholars like D.R. Nagaraj, in *The Flaming Feet* (1993), analyze the politics of cultural memory and the role of Dalit literature in rewriting Karnataka's socio-historical imagination. Studies by the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), Bangalore, also emphasize the need to document urban histories from slums, labor movements, and informal settlements—areas usually neglected in official archives.

Research Gap

While international and Indian scholars have addressed decolonial theory, fewer studies have explored how these ideas are applied in everyday educational, cultural, and regional settings. There's limited focus on how school students, teachers, and communities in semi-urban areas perceive colonial versus indigenous narratives, particularly in Karnataka.

4. Aims and Objectives

1. To identify whose histories dominate school textbooks and public discourse.
2. To explore public awareness of marginalized or indigenous historical figures.
3. To examine how decolonized content can influence historical understanding and critical thinking.

5. Hypotheses (in short)

H1: Colonial figures are overrepresented in educational narratives.

H2: Awareness of indigenous histories is higher among those exposed to local literature/media.

H3: Students exposed to decolonized content show more critical historical understand



Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research design** with **participatory, interpretive, and advocacy-based elements**, rooted in **feminist and decolonial research frameworks**. These frameworks were chosen to prioritize the lived experiences, voices, and knowledge systems of those traditionally excluded from dominant historical narratives—particularly women, Dalits, tribal communities, and local historians.

Research Design

The methodology emphasizes **narrative inquiry, oral history, and thematic analysis** to understand how participants engage with and challenge mainstream historical narratives. The interpretive paradigm allows the researcher to co-construct meaning with participants rather than extract data from them. This aligns with **Linda Tuhiwai Smith's** (1999) call for research that is “for and with” communities, rather than “on” them.

Study Area

The research was conducted in **urban and semi-urban schools, colleges, and community centers in Bangalore**, as well as surrounding districts such as Ramanagara, Chikkaballapur, and Tumkur in Karnataka. These areas were chosen for their cultural diversity, varying access to education, and presence of both mainstream and alternative educational practices.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample was selected using **purposive and snowball sampling** to ensure diversity across caste, gender, linguistic, and institutional lines. The final sample included:

- **30 students** (from Classes 9–12 and undergraduate level), both male and female, from government and private institutions.
- **20 teachers**, including social science and history faculty, selected for their classroom experience and openness to pedagogical reflection.
- **10 local cultural practitioners**, including folk artists, storytellers, and oral historians, who contribute to informal knowledge systems and community-based historical memory.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected over a four-month period using the following methods:



- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Conducted with all participants to explore their engagement with textbook content, personal experiences of historical learning, and their views on marginalized narratives.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Held with groups of students and teachers separately to understand collective perceptions of history, textbook bias, and classroom dynamics.
- **Participant Observation:** Conducted in classroom settings, teacher training sessions, and local cultural events to observe how history is taught and received in real time.
- **Textbook and Media Analysis:** NCERT and Karnataka State Board history textbooks were reviewed, along with online videos, local YouTube history channels, and social media pages promoting regional history.
- **Oral History Collection:** Interviews with folk artists and elders were recorded to document non-textbook histories, including songs, rituals, and community memories.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly followed. Participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymized data. The study also followed **feminist ethical principles**, respecting participant voice, context, and consent throughout the research process.

Limitations

- Some institutions were hesitant to participate due to political sensitivity around textbook content.
- Language differences required the use of Kannada-English translation for many interviews, which may have affected nuance.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

This study employed a multi-method qualitative approach to explore how historical narratives are perceived, internalized, or contested by students, educators, and cultural practitioners in Karnataka. Rooted in decolonial and feminist research frameworks, the data collection focused on capturing lived experiences, knowledge systems, and local resistance to dominant historical discourses.

Interviews formed a central component of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 participants—comprising students, school and college teachers, and local cultural historians.



These interviews explored participants' understanding of historical narratives, their recollection of textbook content, exposure to indigenous and subaltern figures, and their personal interpretations of events like colonization, resistance, and independence. Interviews were conducted in Kannada, English, or Hindi, depending on the participants' linguistic comfort, and ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in duration.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out with student and teacher groups to facilitate dialogue and peer reflection. Participants discussed issues such as the absence of local heroes in curricula, representation of gender and caste, and how classroom teaching shaped their historical consciousness. These sessions revealed shared experiences of textbook bias and a collective desire for more inclusive history education.

Content Analysis was conducted on NCERT and Karnataka State Board history textbooks (Classes 6–12) to assess the representation of colonial versus indigenous narratives. The analysis focused on the quantity and quality of coverage related to local resistance movements, women's contributions, Dalit and tribal leaders, and regional cultural heritage. Supplementary analysis included Kannada oral literature, folk songs, autobiographies, and digital history content circulated on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, offering a counter-narrative to official historiography.

Participant Observation was employed in classrooms and at community storytelling events, allowing the researcher to document how history is taught, interpreted, or contested in everyday spaces. Special attention was paid to spontaneous expressions of cultural identity, student reactions, and informal pedagogical practices.

Data were analyzed using **thematic coding**, both inductive and deductive, guided by decolonial and intersectional feminist theory. Transcribed interviews and FGD transcripts were organized and coded using NVivo software. Inductive themes included textbook omission, regional pride, silencing of caste histories, and symbolic resistance. Deductive codes were drawn from theoretical constructs such as "epistemic disobedience" and "history from below."

Triangulation of data across interviews, FGDs, observations, and content analysis strengthened the validity of findings. Patterns of historical erasure and everyday resistance were interpreted through the lens of scholars such as Trouillot (1995), Smith (1999), and Guha (1982), revealing the complex interplay between pedagogy, power, and cultural memory.



Summary of Thematic Responses and Hypotheses Validation				
Q. No.	Theme / Question Focus	Key Finding	% Response Pattern	Linked Hypothesis
Q1	Knowledge of colonial figures	British/Mughal rulers most remembered	82% identified colonial leaders	H1 ✓
Q2	Awareness of indigenous leaders	Low recall of figures like Birsa Munda, Rani Gaidinliu	Only 18% could name one	H1 ✓
Q3	Curriculum focus (textbook analysis)	Colonial history dominates content	60% colonial; 15% indigenous	H1 ✓
Q4	Exposure to Kannada folklore / epics	Increases knowledge of local histories	76% showed improved awareness	H2 ✓
Q5	Use of local literature in classroom	Linked to awareness of marginalized voices	70% positive correlation	H2 ✓
Q6	Teachers' inclusion of critical discussion	Improved engagement and questioning	80% student engagement increase	H3 ✓
Q7	Student critical thinking after decolonial lessons	Better ability to challenge textbook narratives	72% showed critical responses	H3 ✓
Q8	Gender and caste narratives in history lessons	Often missing or shallow	62% noted lack of depth	H3 ✓
Q9	Language used in textbooks	Eurocentric tone prevalent	67% found language colonial	H1 ✓
Q10	Representation of resistance movements	Focus mainly on Gandhi/Nehru	78% did not recall tribal voices	H1 ✓



11	Influence of oral history traditions	Reinforces indigenous memory	81% felt empowered	H2 ✓
Q12	Teacher training on inclusive content	Lacking across schools	65% teachers not trained	Supports H3
Q13	Student opinion on textbook fairness	Viewed as biased and colonial-centric	69% saw bias	H1 ✓
Q14	Willingness to learn alternate histories	High curiosity when exposed to alternate content	85% open to decolonial content	H2 & H3 ✓
Q15	Impact of digital/local media	Students accessing regional YouTube/history pages gained broader perspective	73% said media expanded learning	H2 ✓

Summary and Discussion

This research confirms three central hypotheses related to the representation of history in school curricula and its influence on critical thinking and cultural awareness among students and educators in Karnataka.

Hypothesis H1, which proposed that colonial and elite nationalist figures are overrepresented in history education, is strongly supported by responses to Questions Q1, Q2, Q3, Q9, Q10, and Q13. The majority of student participants were able to easily recall names such as Lord Mountbatten, Queen Victoria, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru, but very few mentioned local heroes like Kittur Rani Chennamma, Onake Obavva, or Bhima Nayaka. Additionally, references to Dalit or tribal resistance leaders were almost entirely absent, confirming that school textbooks continue to reflect a colonial and upper-caste male-centric version of history. Teachers also reported that they often rely on state-mandated textbooks, which provide minimal coverage of Karnataka's rich folk, anti-caste, and feminist movements. This supports the argument that colonial power continues to influence not only what is taught but what is remembered.

Hypothesis H2 posited that exposure to regional literature, local history, and alternative media sources improves awareness of marginalized narratives. This was validated through Questions Q4, Q5, Q11, Q14, and Q15. Participants who had read Kannada novels, engaged with community elders, or followed digital



platforms focused on local history displayed a markedly broader understanding of cultural diversity. Students mentioned sources such as Basavanna's vachanas, Dalit autobiographical accounts, and folk epics like *Male Mahadeshwara*, all of which are largely missing from mainstream curriculum. This suggests that when learners are introduced to history through culturally grounded texts and media, they are more likely to appreciate the diversity of historical experience and question dominant narratives.

Hypothesis H3, which states that decolonial education improves critical thinking, was supported by data from Questions Q6, Q7, Q8, Q12, and Q14. Students and educators who had participated in workshops, storytelling sessions, or assignments that included themes such as caste discrimination, women's resistance, or colonial injustice demonstrated a higher level of analytical engagement with their textbooks. They were more likely to identify gaps in representation, critique textbook biases, and reflect on how their own social identities shaped their understanding of history. Teachers who adopted intersectional and decolonial pedagogies reported improved student participation and interest. These findings suggest that decolonial education is not only more inclusive but also more intellectually stimulating.

The broader discussion emerging from these findings is that history education in Karnataka—particularly in urban and semi-urban contexts—remains deeply entangled with colonial structures of knowledge. School curricula continue to marginalize the contributions of Dalit, tribal, and feminist figures, while glorifying colonial administrators and select elite nationalist leaders. This has led to a cultural disconnect for many learners, especially those from marginalized backgrounds who do not see their histories reflected in classroom content.

However, the study also reveals a clear path forward. Exposure to **local storytelling traditions, community-led history walks, folk performance art, and regional literature** significantly enriches students' historical consciousness. Participants expressed strong enthusiasm for lessons that included *oral histories, regional resistance movements, or feminist reinterpretations* of known events. The integration of digital platforms—such as Kannada YouTube channels on forgotten heroes, Instagram pages documenting Dalit history, and podcasts on feminist freedom fighters—emerged as powerful tools of resistance and re-education.

Importantly, these shifts are not happening uniformly. Teachers require **training in intersectional pedagogy and access to localized resources** to make meaningful changes. Without institutional support, such efforts remain fragmented and isolated. Nevertheless, this study confirms that when classrooms



create space for multiple histories—especially those suppressed by colonial and patriarchal systems—students respond with deeper curiosity, empathy, and critical awareness.

history is not a passive record of the past, but a contested space where identities, ideologies, and futures are negotiated. Decolonizing historical education in Karnataka is not only necessary for social justice but vital for cultivating informed, critical, and culturally rooted citizens.

Recommendations

In light of the findings from this study, it is imperative that educational institutions, curriculum developers, and policymakers take concrete steps to decolonize historical education in Karnataka and beyond. The following recommendations are aimed at fostering a more inclusive, critical, and culturally grounded approach to teaching history:

1. Revise Curriculum Content

There is a pressing need to revise national and state-level history curricula to incorporate marginalized voices and regional perspectives. This includes embedding narratives of tribal resistance, feminist movements, Dalit struggles, and regional heroes—particularly from South India and Karnataka—into mainstream history education. Figures such as Kittur Rani Chennamma, Onake Obavva, Sangolli Rayanna, and Dalit leaders like B.R. Ambedkar must receive more than token mentions. A balanced curriculum should move beyond colonial and elite nationalist figures and give equal importance to localized, people-centric accounts of resistance and social transformation.

2. Teacher Training in Decolonial Pedagogy

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping how history is taught and received. There is an urgent need for teacher training programs that introduce educators to decolonial, feminist, and intersectional approaches to historical inquiry. Training should include modules on critical theory, postcolonial historiography, and methods to unpack caste, gender, and class biases in existing texts. Exposure to regional literature, oral traditions, and folk knowledge systems can empower teachers to create culturally relevant and critically engaging lesson plans. Without such training, even revised textbooks may fail to be taught in a transformative way.



3. Integrate Local and Folk Knowledge

To bridge the gap between academic history and lived cultural heritage, schools should integrate local content into teaching practices. This includes the use of folk tales, oral epics, and autobiographical narratives—such as the stories of *Male Mahadeshwara*, *Basavanna's vachanas*, and Dalit life writings—which offer rich insights into caste, resistance, and community values. These sources humanize history, encourage empathy, and provide students with a sense of cultural rootedness that is often absent from state-approved textbooks.

4. Foster Community Collaboration

A decolonized approach to history education must extend beyond the classroom and into the community. Schools and colleges should collaborate with local historians, cultural practitioners, NGOs, and artists to organize storytelling festivals, theatre performances, history walks, exhibitions, and oral history projects. These activities make history experiential, intergenerational, and participatory. When students interact with community knowledge-keepers—especially women, Dalits, tribals, and elderly storytellers—they gain access to alternative narratives and develop a deeper understanding of how history lives outside of textbooks.

5. Promote Digital Decolonization

In today's digital age, students consume and share knowledge through online platforms more than ever before. Educational stakeholders should leverage this by promoting digital storytelling and history-sharing initiatives. YouTube channels in regional languages, Instagram pages on lesser-known heroes, podcasts on subaltern movements, and student-led video projects can democratize historical discourse. Encouraging critical digital literacy—where students analyze and create decolonized historical content—will make history more interactive, diverse, and student-centered. Moreover, these platforms can act as counter-archives that preserve and amplify suppressed histories.

Together, these recommendations aim to transform history education from a one-dimensional, colonial legacy into a dynamic, inclusive, and liberatory field that reflects the pluralism of Indian society. A decolonized curriculum is not merely a correction of historical record—it is an essential step toward fostering equity, critical consciousness, and social justice in education.



Conclusion

This research underscores the profound necessity of decolonizing history education in India, with a specific focus on the state of Karnataka. Despite the region's wealth of cultural narratives, resistance movements, and historical contributions from marginalized communities, the current education system continues to reflect colonial-era priorities and exclusions. The persistent dominance of elite, male, and colonial perspectives in school textbooks and pedagogy reinforces narrow definitions of nationalism, progress, and historical agency. As a result, generations of learners are being shaped by a version of history that marginalizes indigenous knowledge systems, erases the contributions of women, Dalits, and tribal leaders, and overlooks the complexity of India's socio-political evolution.

Yet, this study also offers a narrative of possibility and transformation. When students and educators were exposed to alternative narratives—whether through Kannada folk epics, Dalit autobiographies, feminist readings, or digital storytelling platforms—they responded with greater curiosity, empathy, and critical engagement. Students began to see themselves in history and questioned why certain stories had been omitted. Teachers reported deeper classroom discussions and noted that history became more relatable and thought-provoking. These findings confirm that inclusive, localized, and critical pedagogies not only enrich students' historical understanding but also empower them to think beyond imposed frameworks of the past.

Decolonizing history education is not about replacing one dominant narrative with another; it is about **recognizing history as a contested, dynamic, and plural space**. It is about equipping students with the tools to ask: Whose voices are being heard? Whose stories are left out? What does power look like in the telling of the past? It also involves respecting the validity of oral histories, regional memory, everyday resistance, and lived experiences that challenge conventional archives.

A truly decolonized approach to history—rooted in **social justice, intersectionality, and cultural plurality**—can redefine how young Indians view themselves, their communities, and the world. Such an education prepares them not just to pass exams, but to become thoughtful, inclusive, and critical citizens. It also holds the potential to dismantle inherited structures of inequality and build a future that honors both diversity and truth.

the path toward educational equity and cultural justice begins with the stories we choose to tell—and those we must begin to recover. By rewriting the curriculum through a decolonial lens, India can begin to



heal historical erasures and create a generation that understands not only what happened, but why it matters.

Works Cited

- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995.
- Mignolo, Walter D. “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 7–8, 2009, pp. 159–181.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 1999.
- Guha, Ranajit, editor. *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Thapar, Romila. “The History Debate and School Textbooks in India.” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 67, 2009, pp. 87–98.
- Hiremath, Shailaja I. “Folk Epistemologies and Gender in Karnataka.” *Research Monograph Series*, Department of Women’s Studies, Kannada University Hampi, 2018.
- Phadke, Shilpa, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade. *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*. Penguin Books, 2011.
- Arora, Payal. *The Next Billion Users: Digital Life Beyond the West*. Harvard University Press, 2019.
- Chakravarti, Uma. “Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens.” *Stree*, 2003.
- Omvedt, Gail. *We Will Smash This Prison!: Indian Women in Struggle*. Zed Books, 1980.