

*It's all in there, no it isn't: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Adolescent
Education Programme of India as it Relates to Gender and Sexuality
Hierarchies*

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study takes up Critical Discourse Analysis and thematic document analysis to show how power operates through taken-for-granted schooling policies and practices in India. Specifically, this work addresses power by identifying gaps and inequitable discourses in the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) regarding gender and sexuality. My data analysis has revealed three salient themes, all of which act as mechanisms of gender inequity: (i) the perpetuation of patriarchal gender norms, (ii) the privileging of heteronormativity, and (iii) biases and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities. Sexuality education geared toward youth in India has the potential to address culture-specific gender norms and attitudes before they crystallize. However, for this to happen, it is vital for Indian youth to engage critically with the discourses sexuality education enacts and perpetuates by critiquing, challenging, and questioning issues of power, marginalization, and representation.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my husband for loving me unconditionally and being so patient and kind throughout this journey. Thank you so much for teaching me that it is never too late to chase your passions.

To Linda. Thank you for being a source of encouragement and always supporting me in everything I do.

To Ralph. Thank you for sitting with me and my thoughts for hours...even from afar.

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Chapter One: Introduction

There is a documented gap between the official content of the current national school curriculum of sexuality education in India, formally called the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP), and the gendered power asymmetries perpetuated through educational practices and discourses in Indian schools (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014). School environments are “widely seen as ‘one of the most formative arenas’ in which young people learn about gender and sexuality” (Iyer, 2019, p. 224). Therefore, schools are considered a favorable setting for challenging power imbalances and the questioning of gender equations that have long existed. However, in accenting tensions associated with implementing sexuality education in India, Das (2014) suggests that:

since the 1990s, there have been several attempts by the Government of India in collaboration with other non-government agencies to introduce sexuality education into the school curricula. However, this journey has been riddled with several challenges – religious, socio-cultural, and political. (p. 210)

Pushing further, scholars like Nanda et al. (2013) have revealed that the content and approach of the AEP curriculum do not adequately address the structural and power inequities that girls and women face in India. The AEP also does not provide the skills students need to be able to challenge and question socially accepted gender roles and expectations. In the document, socially accepted gendered power dynamics “emphasize patriarchy, power relations, and hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity and contribute to the problem of sexual violence” and sexual harassment against girls and women in India (Saravan as cited in Nieder et al., 2019, p. 1720). In addition, the Supreme

Court of India has officially recognized transgender people as ‘third gender’ and directed the Central Government to implement welfare policies for their benefit (Gulati & Anand, 2023). Notwithstanding this, there has not been a step forward in education toward equitable supports for LGBTQ+ communities thus far (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014; Jose et al., 2023; Srivastava et al., 2021). There remains an urgent need to resist heteronormative discourses and power dynamics that privilege heterosexuality in schools. For education practices and structures to be more equitable, LGBTQ+ people and communities must be valued, represented, and supported in curricula and school environments.

Research Question

Addressing this context, my inquiry is framed around the following research question: How is the national curriculum of the AEP in India influenced by dominant discourses of gender and sexuality? This focus allows me to identify and examine how dominant gendered and heteronormative power dynamics and social structures pervade and influence the sexuality education curriculum in Indian schools (Anand, 2016; Arvind et al., 2022; Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014; Maity, 2022; Nieder et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021; Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023). Going further, however, this study provides me with the space to assess and critically analyze whether the discourses in the curriculum are helping or hindering young people in developing critically informed and equitable understandings of gender and sexuality (Ahuja et al., 2019; Chakrapani et al., 2022; McCammon et al., 2022).

Rationale

Deconstructing the AEP curriculum is important in the Indian social context to encourage equity related to gender and sexuality. It is essential to name and critique

inequitable discourses and work to replace them with those that affirm differences (Anand, 2016; Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014; McCammon et al., 2022; Nieder et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2021). By means of Thematic Analysis (TA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study examines and critiques the current AEP curriculum taught in schools in India. While TA is a method for analyzing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and categorize repeated patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006), CDA uncovers the relations between texts and their social contexts (Collin, 2016). By drawing on these methodologies, I investigate the way dominant discourses and hegemonic power relations regarding gender and sexuality are discursively legitimized and validated through texts within socio-political contexts (van Dijk, 2001). The purpose of this qualitative study, which is informed by a theoretical framework influenced by feminist social theory, queer theory, and critical pedagogy is to examine and analyze gender ideology and institutionalized power asymmetries that shape and influence sexuality education curriculum in Indian schools.¹ I draw inspiration from the works of Kamla Bhasin, Kavita Krishnan, Sampat Pal Devi, Jasmine George, Rituparna Bora, Raya Sarkar, Gita Thadani, Supriyo Chakraborty, Abhay Dang, Parth Phiroze Merhotra, Uday Raj Anand, Sohini Chakrabarti, Safina Amin, Kalki Subramaniam, Keshav Suri, Harish Iyer, and many others who have all worked and are still working for the equal rights and representation of women and LGBTQ+ communities in India. This study contributes to the

¹ Feminist social theory aims to understand the nature of inequalities between women and men in the social structure and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality (Adichie, 2014; Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 2000). Queer theory seeks to dismantle categorical notions, challenge the heteronormative perspective, and move beyond sex, gender, and sexuality categories (lisahunter, 2019). Critical pedagogy seeks to transform oppressive structures in society using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning (Sanjakdar et al., 2015).

existing literature on the equity gap in the official content of the AEP curriculum. These findings also enhance the limited body of research regarding the current curriculum nationwide, especially on how this gap perpetuates gender inequities and oppression in broader social contexts.

Positionality in the Research

Positioning myself in the study, I note my insider/outsider status as a cis-heterosexual woman of South Asian descent currently residing in Canada. I have experienced sexual harassment regularly in public spaces in India. I view some of those experiences as extremely traumatizing. Even today, I carry the burden of trauma from some of those experiences. I was drawn to this project owing to my first-hand encounters with pervasive sexual harassment growing up and living in India and with the gendered power dynamics and hierarchies in the conservative society. As a patriarchal society, gender hierarchies in India have such potency, and sexual harassment is considered part of a girl/young woman's life. Although I was subjected to instances of sexual harassment repeatedly, I do not recall ever discussing such matters explicitly with my family, friends, or community. This alludes to the fact that such issues have been greatly normalized and are not considered important enough to be discussed in families, schools, or communities. Being a girl or a woman in a traditional societal structure like India presents various challenges. These challenges include rape within marriage not necessarily considered criminal and socially tolerated, acid attacks, honor killings, female infanticide, child marriage, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and police apathy (Agarwal et al., 2022; Verma et al., 2017). I have felt powerless to undermine strict gender norms and attitudes

that are the result of heteropatriarchy.² Even after spending more than 15 years abroad, returning home still triggers feelings of anxiety, rage, frustration, and powerlessness. This is because gender hierarchies are ingrained in such a way that they have not only been normalized but also internalized.

Organization of the Thesis

Against this background, I explore how the AEP curriculum in India perpetuates patriarchal norms, gender roles, and heteropatriarchal power dynamics that systematically exclude those who do not conform to accepted gender and sexual norms (Ahuja et al., 2019; Arvind et al., 2022; Bhallamudi, 2022; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Maity, 2022; Nieder et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023). In Chapter Two, I discuss the theoretical framework I explore to inform my research. In Chapter Three, I introduce the body of literature I review to inform my work. Following this, in Chapter Four, I provide details of my research methodology, explaining my decision to combine TA and CDA. This chapter also includes the methods of data collection and the analytical steps I employ in my data analysis. In Chapter Five, I provide a detailed description of my research findings with relevant examples from the AEP curriculum and the supporting documents. Finally, in Chapter Six, I include my interpretations of the findings and discuss their implications in the last chapter of this thesis.

² Heteropatriarchy can be defined as “the systems and practices that normalize and center male dominance; male-female gender binaries; and heterosexual identities, family units, and sexual expressions” (Woodson & Pabon, 2016, p. 57).

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides a detailed description of the theoretical frames I use to inform my study: these include feminist social theory, queer theory, and critical pedagogy. Each theory helps me build a framework that provides a ‘lens’ that I use to investigate the research question for this study. Through this multi-theoretical lens, I examine how societal power relations may be established and reinforced through implicit and explicit messages embedded in the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) curriculum. These theories also help me discern whether this curriculum empowers young people to challenge dominant social models that promote rigid gender attitudes that remain pervasive in the country. The following sections outline these theoretical frameworks, provide historical background on their development, discuss their applications in both Western and Indian contexts, and demonstrate their influence on my work.

Feminist Social Theory

Feminist theorists contend that women’s experiences have been systematically ignored in mainstream social theory. The field has shown how this type of social exclusion is due to dominant ideologies and discourses that enforce unequal power relations between women and men in societies (Fotaki & Pullen, 2024). To address this tension, feminist social theory foregrounds the experiences of women informed by class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical abilities (Benschop, 2021). Jenkins, Narayanaswamy and Sweetman (2019) define the overarching goal of feminist research as being “to create spaces and opportunities to reveal lived realities of power inequalities and difference, and provide evidence that can be deployed in working towards addressing these ingrained inequalities” (p. 415). Feminist social theory, in its broadest sense, helps to understand the

nature of gender-based inequities and focuses on addressing the politics and power dynamics that relate to gender and sexuality. It also focuses on the promotion of women's rights and interests.

The relationship between feminist theory, feminism, and feminist movements is intrinsically interwoven. While feminist theory provides the conceptual framework that informs feminist thought, feminist movements translate these theoretical principles into action through activism and advocacy to promote gender equality and social justice (Arinder, 2020). Throughout various stages of women's struggle, feminist movements played an important role in raising public consciousness about social inequities (Cranton & Merriam, 2015). Themes explored across various disciplines in feminist research include women's roles and lives in the domestic and social spheres (Ahmed, 2017), patriarchy (Adichie, 2014), discrimination, objectification (Anzaldúa, 1987), identities and image (Lorde, 1984), stereotyping, and oppression (Bensimon, 1992). Feminist theory proposes that when power and oppression are acknowledged and disrupted, understanding, advocacy, and change can occur (Arinder, 2020).

Sara Ahmed (2017) in her book, *Living a Feminist Life*, asserts that "feminism is wherever feminism needs to be. Feminism needs to be everywhere. Feminism needs to be everywhere because feminism is not everywhere" (p. 4). Ahmed continues by arguing for the necessity of feminism for challenging everyday sexism and the importance of recognizing that as a significant step for a feminist movement. In her book, *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks (2000) speaks about how most people think of feminism as being about rights – about women gaining equal rights. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) in

the modified book version of her classic talk “*We should all be feminists*” on TEDx Talks stated that:

feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general - but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem targets women. That the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human. For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. It is only fair that the solution to the problem should acknowledge that. (pp. 13-14)

Feminist theory is united in a focus on gender-based power dynamics. However, as Winslow (2006) points out, competing ideas, objectives, and viewpoints within feminist movements have always existed. She points to the ambivalence of the words feminist and feminism, arguing that they are too narrowly centered on the experiences of Western women. In her book, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Mohanty (2003) points out the false homogenization of women as a global sisterhood. In addition, Judith Butler (1990) asserts that “the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women” refuses the variety of cultural, social, and political intersections that go into constructing the concrete array of ‘women’ (p. 14). hooks (1984) laments in the essay *Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression* that feminist discourse has had difficulty reaching a consensus regarding what feminism is or accepting definitions that could serve as a point of unification. Ahmed (2017) proposes a general

definition of feminism that includes questioning how to live in a world that is not free of inequality and injustice, fostering more equal relationships with others, supporting those who have been marginalized by social systems, and confronting histories that have become rock solid. hooks (2000) defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression” (p. 1). For Ahmed (2017), the word feminism “brings to mind women who have stood up, spoken back, risked lives, homes, relationships in the struggle for more bearable worlds” (p. 1). I see this diversity in understanding ‘feminism’ as working together to examine how power operates in society.

Both feminist social theory and feminist movements have a long and rich history. Since feminist theory emerged from women’s political movements, it is impossible to tell the history of feminist theory apart from the history of feminism (Collins, 2016). Feminism, emerging in the late sixties and seventies, has its roots in the late eighteenth century, when the revolutionary zeal in the West began to influence writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft (Osborne, 2001). Her groundbreaking work of literature, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), is seen as the foundation of modern white feminism and still resonates in feminism today (Winslow, 2006). She viewed the State as an agent of social reform, demanding equal education be ensured for women and passing legislation to overturn longstanding traditions and institutions that subordinated women (p. 191).

According to Skeat et al. (2022), in most definitions, feminism is described as both a belief and an aim, making it both a theoretical position and a way of directing action. The word ‘critical’ modifies feminist theory, implying that feminist theory criticizes society’s misogynistic view of women (Wildman, 2007). Feminist theory, viewed in this light, is a

critical theory that makes gender a central focus of inquiry, asking ‘the woman question’ that identifies and challenges the exclusion of women and their needs.

The history of feminist politics and theory is often talked of as consisting of four ‘waves’ of feminism. Feminist social theory has influenced and been influenced by the agendas and struggles of each of these waves. The presence of feminist movements has been felt across the world. The history of feminism includes the women’s suffrage movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s (McPherson, 2000; Schuster, 2017). In 1989, Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality, which calls for a shift away from a single-axis theory/analysis that operates in isolation toward one that engages with identities at multiple axes of power, such as caste, class, sexuality, and disability within womanhood (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectional feminism underscores these differences and multiplicities within womanhood rather than equality based on a singular identity (Nanditha, 2022). Anti-essentialist understandings of women’s interests and fluid gender identities in the 1990s to a focus on sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture, among other issues, beginning around 2012, have all worked toward the advancement of women’s rights and interests (Looft, 2017; Rampton, 2015).

Historians suggest that the first wave of white, Western feminism formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, when three hundred women and men rallied to the cause of equality for women (Pande, 2018). At the meeting, Elizabeth Cady Stanton introduced her ‘Declaration of Sentiments’, modeled on the US Declaration of Independence, which detailed the inferior status of women and called for extensive reforms, effectively launching the American women’s rights movement (Osborne, 2001).

The first wave of Western feminism is generally defined as having lasted between 1840 and 1920, with a focus on the abolition of slavery and the equality of citizenry (Looft, 2017). Scholars contend that the second wave began with protests of the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969 (Kreydatus, 2008). White feminists stood against women being reduced to objects of beauty dominated by a patriarchy that sought to keep them in the home or dull, low-paying jobs (Rampton, 2015). Patriarchy refers to a cultural construct of male dominance and power that grants men the right to control women's lives while placing women in a subordinate and disempowered position (Nieder et al., 2019). The second wave focused on greater access to men's spheres, including women's equal rights to education, workplace equality, and reproductive freedom (Looft, 2017).

The third wave which began in the mid-90s sought to challenge or avoid what it deemed the second wave's essentialist definitions of women which overemphasized the experiences of upper-middle-class white women (Pande, 2018). Third wave feminists are often recognized as rejecting the idea of a unified list of values and goals, calling into question the broader universal ideals that allowed the first two waves to find common ground (Looft, 2017). Embracing differences and diversity in perspectives among women, third wave feminism supports anti-essentialist understandings of women's interests and recognizes fluid gender identities (Schuster, 2017; Yu, 2009). Anti-essentialism rejects the universalizing claims that all women share a common social position and form of experience (Stone, 2007).

Finally, the fourth wave, dating from 2008 onwards, has enabled a shift in the feminist protest culture and new ways to unpack intersectional forms of oppression (Looft, 2017; Yeung, 2022). A distinctive trait of fourth wave feminism is its reliance on and usage

of technology and social media to connect and reach populations across cultural and national borders (Looft, 2017). The influence of fourth wave feminism in North America was witnessed after Donald Trump's win against Hillary Clinton in the US presidential election in 2016. Through feminist efforts to mobilize on social media because Trump had made inflammatory remarks about women (Gantt-Shafer et al., 2019), the Women's March grew to include demonstrations across the US and around the globe and is perhaps the largest single-day demonstration in US history. Arguably even more significant is the #MeToo movement. The phrase 'me too' can be traced back to 2006, when African American activist Tarana Burke used the expression to draw attention to the prevalence of sexual violence against marginalized women (Trott, 2021). The campaign gained widespread attention in 2017 when white women who had endured years of sexual harassment and assault by Harvey Weinstein came forward (Brittain, 2023). This prompted victims of sexual harassment and assault around the world, across all ethnicities, to share their experiences on social media using the hashtag #MeToo. The movement grew over the coming months and brought accusations against powerful men in politics, business, entertainment, and the news media across the globe. Most recently, this emphasis was witnessed when thousands of protesters gathered across the US to protest the end of the right to abortion, marching on the 50th anniversary of the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that made abortion a constitutional right in 1973 but was struck down in June 2022 (Hubler, 2022). Information aimed at easing the chaos caused by the decision, especially for women seeking abortion services, flooded social media (Azar, 2022). Like the struggles and mobilizations of Western feminists, Indian feminists have also fought against culture-specific issues within the country's patriarchal society.

Feminism in India

As scholars suggest, feminism in India started independently as an initiative in the nineteenth century by women advocating for women's rights and education (Jain, 2020; Thakur, 2012). Savitri Phule, credited with founding the Indian feminist movement, became the first female teacher in the country and started the first school for girls in Pune in 1848; Tarabai Shinde wrote India's first feminist text, *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men), in 1882; and Pandita Ramabai criticized patriarchy and caste-system in Hinduism in the 1880s are some of the earliest examples of India's feminist movements (Alok, 2016; Khan, 2018; Prasad, 2017). Durgabai Deshmukh addressed key issues in female education, including free education for girls, the education of girls in rural areas, and the establishment of the Department of Women's Studies in the Central Ministry of Education (Garai, 2023; Shah, 2021).

Post-independence in 1947, the Indian feminist movement has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in the workforce, and the right to political parity (Sen, 2021). In the late 1970s, women activists organized themselves around the issues of gender-based violence (Upadhyay, 2015). From the 1970s until her death in 2021, Kamla Bhasin was a prominent voice in the women's movement in India and across South Asia, playing a significant role in the development of feminism in the region (Rajgopal, 2021). She is credited with developing the idea of observing November 30th as South Asian Women's Day, an act of cross-border solidarity (Viswanath, 2021). A discussion on feminism in India would be incomplete without the mention of the Gulabi Gang, formed in 2006 in the Banda District of Uttar Pradesh. The Gulabi Gang was initially intended to punish oppressive husbands, fathers, and brothers and combat domestic violence and

desertion (Sundaram, 2020). It has developed into an organized women's movement, a women's vigilante group, to further the cause of women's rights under the leadership of Sampat Pal Devi (Berthod, 2009; Roy, 2018). Since then, the movement has evolved and expanded its activities for women's empowerment by stopping child marriages, persuading families to educate girl child, training women in self-defense, creating awareness about the evils of dowry, reporting sex offenders and abusive husbands to police, publicly shaming molesters, and encouraging women to become financially independent (Pathak, 2022).

Jha and Kurian (2018) claim that feminist movements in India are at the forefront of a new kind of feminist movement that challenges violence in public spaces and sexual harassment issues on social media. Many youth-led feminist initiatives have expanded and developed using the potential the online world offers for connecting, networking, and mobilizing. Many of these initiatives, led by young feminists like Jasmine George and Rituparna Bora, advocate for sexuality education in the country and focus on bodily autonomy, love, and desire (Aleya, 2019; Karia, 2023a). They exemplify new ways in which young women, fed up with the increasing policing and regulation of their mobility, expressions, relationships, and desires are mobilizing, collectivizing, and agitating (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). Feminist movements, such as the Pink Chaddi Campaign, the Society of Painted and Dented Ladies, #happytobleed, Pinjra Tod, #iwillgoout, Kiss of Love, and most recently, #MeToo and the LoSHA – have gone viral and transformed public discourse around these issues (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Roy, 2018).

For example, in 2018, the #MeToo movement reached India's mainstream public discourse. Although the movement took a turn in its later stages toward the discussion of sexual abuse in the Indian film industry (Mishra, 2020), the #MeToo movement in India

was first called to action by an Indian Dalit student, Raya Sarkar. A law student at the University of California, she created a storm of debate online in feminist circles in India with the publication of a list of sexual predators in Indian academia (John, 2020). Eventually, the movement shifted its focus from marginalized Dalit voices to media personalities and Bollywood; “a rendition of the western trajectory of #MeToo in India” (Nanditha, 2022, p. 1674). Several women, including Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta and Indian journalist Priya Ramani, came out with allegations and accounts of sexual harassment on social media (Godbole, 2021). Another social media-based feminist movement, Why Loiter, began after three young women inspired by the book, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on the Streets of Mumbai* (Phadke et al., 2011), re-examined their understanding of safety in the city (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). In 2017, the #WhyLoiter hashtag was trending on Twitter with women posting pictures and stories of reclaiming public spaces, creating the narrative of resisting male domination and patriarchy in the physical and virtual spaces (Jain, 2020). An additional initiative, Pinjra Tod (Break the Cage), emerged in 2015 in response to Jamia Milia Islamia University in Delhi canceling night-outs (a fixed number of nights a student is allowed to stay outside the hostel) for female students (John, 2020; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). Students came together to write and publish collectively an open letter to the Delhi Commission of Women (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). This letter discussed the issues that female students face regularly, including moral policing, shorter curfews, and a lack of redressal of sexual harassment complaints (John, 2020; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). It has evolved into a movement through its Facebook page against societal institutions through which patriarchy operates (Roy, 2018).

Regarded as a milestone in the contemporary Indian women's struggle is the Nirbhaya Movement (Upadhyay, 2015). While emerging as one of the most influential activists during the massive protests that followed the gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old student in Delhi, Kavita Krishnan has contributed substantially to shaping the discourse of the movement in the country. Her speech on the 'death penalty for rapists can't act as a deterrent' that went viral on YouTube has been influential in the discourse around rape (Bazliel, 2013). The Pink Chaddi Campaign (Pink Underwear Movement) in 2009, started by a Delhi-based journalist, Nisha Susan, through a Facebook group called 'Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women', garnered a lot of attention worldwide (Srivastava, 2019). The Campaign's method of protest was to send pink underwear to the headquarters of the Mangaluru-based 'Sri Ram Sene' group (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). The leaders and members of the group had beaten up women in a pub to teach them a lesson for transgressing the boundaries of proper femininity (Roy, 2018).

Through all the feminist movements in India, the 1970s saw Indian feminism branded as an elitist and Western movement where urban class women began speaking for the poor (Phadke, 2003). Contemporary, digital, feminist movements have been specifically critiqued for their focus on middle-class, upper-caste issues (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). The #MeToo movement laid bare practices of non-inclusivity for its large focus on Bollywood celebrities and other well-known media personalities (Nanditha, 2022). It has largely ignored intersectional identities and failed to engage in discussions about the everyday experiences of sexual abuse and harassment of Dalit women, women of lower caste and class, rural communities, and other marginalized gendered bodies (p. 1675). These communities have vastly different experiences of oppression than the elite,

urban Indian woman. While movements, like #happytoleed and #WhyLoiter are exclusively for those who have regular access to the internet (and by extension, social media), they are also necessarily geared toward women who are of a very narrow class, caste, and age bracket (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018).

Nonetheless, feminism in India today is more diverse and complex than ever before. Over the years, Indian feminism has taken many forms, reflecting the diversity of experiences and struggles faced by women in different parts of the country (John, 2020; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Nanditha, 2022; Roy, 2018). Despite progress, feminism in India still faces many challenges, and patriarchy and strict gender attitudes remain pervasive, with deep-seated cultural and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequities. Girls and women continue to face discrimination, harassment, dowry deaths, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence (IPV) every day (Agarwal et al., 2022; Lathabhavan et al., 2023; Mondal & Paul, 2023; Verma et al., 2017). The National Crime Records Bureau, in its annual crime report, documented a significant increase of over 31% in crimes against women since 2014 (Deepala, 2024). Crimes against women were predominantly categorized as cruelty by husband or his relatives accounting for 31.4%, followed by kidnapping and abduction at 19.2%, assault with intent to outrage modesty at 18.7%, and rape at 7.1% (Verma, 2024).

Feminists have long argued that educational work is political due to unequal power/knowledge relations embedded in education systems and governance (Blackmore, 2013). Inclusive schooling necessitates inclusive leadership, where diversity in and of leadership is an integral aspect of education (p. 148). The focus on women and leadership has been a symbolic battle based on what Fraser (1997) refers to as representational justice.

Representational justice means that the absence of women in leadership in any democratic society is indicative of broader gender and educational disparities (Blackmore, 2013). Girls in India represent one of the most vulnerable groups of learners who have historically been denied a quality education (Kaur & Kapoor, 2021). Reasons for why girls are disadvantaged in terms of educational opportunities vary between contexts and are a complex combination of economic and socio-cultural issues. These include school location, religious beliefs, inadequate resources, irrelevant curricula, poverty, early marriage, and financial constraints (Kakkar, 2020; Ramanaik et al., 2018). In the Indian socio-cultural environment that favors the boy child, the education of boys is usually a priority (Kaur & Kapoor, 2021). Girls are assumed to need less schooling to fulfill their future roles as wives and mothers (Landry et al., 2020). Allan (2008) argues that the existence of gender biases in education policy discourses produces negative consequences that systematically disadvantage girls. Feminist educational researchers focus on topics ranging from the place of women in curricula, the underachievement of girls in the schooling systems to hidden curricula surrounding gender and gender roles to campaign for change (Freeman, 2019).

With this backdrop, feminist social theory helps us better understand and address unequal and oppressive gender relations (Ahmed, 2017; Arinder, 2020). We can only overcome gender inequities, oppressions, and injustices against women when we are able to identify the sources that maintain and sustain them (Dhar et al., 2019; Iyer, 2019; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; McCammon et al., 2022). Feminist theory does not solely look at gendered power and oppression to understand how the experiences of women are different from the experiences of men (Fattal, 2019); through intersectionality, it also

examines how systems of power and oppression interact (Crossman, 2020). In this sense, feminist theory provides an analytic framework while at the same time paving the path for political praxis (Fattal, 2019). If we, as a society, want to engage in meaningful political praxis, we need to develop strategies to liberate ourselves from sexist and misogynistic mindsets and feminist theory offers the tools to do just that. Feminist theory facilitates debate on gender inequities to be addressed through collective action, legal reform, education, and policy initiatives (Buzzanell, 2019).

For my present work, feminist social theory provides a solid framework that helps me critically analyze one of the sources that maintain and sustain gender inequities and oppressions – school curricula. Gender biases and stereotypes in school curricula remain one of “the hardest to budge rocks in securing gender equality” (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023, p. 70). Such educational practices expose the misogynistic nature of society, which not only marginalizes but also trivializes women and their issues. Additionally, Indian feminism should underscore different axes of feminist identities for Indian women, look beyond the traditional definition of Indian womanhood, and include other gendered and minoritized communities within this discourse (Nanditha, 2022). An intersectional feminist approach in the Indian cultural context that supports this work can confront patriarchy, sexism, and heteronormative structures in society while also listening to the everyday struggles of the LGBTQ+ communities and the Indian transgender (hijra) community who feel alienated from the feminist community. Indian feminist struggles have worked and continue to work tirelessly toward the upliftment and empowerment of Indian women, and I see my work as an extension of their work.

To further strengthen my theoretical basis, I draw on and honor queer theory in the next section by providing its historical context in the West, the history of queer activism in India, and the application of queer pedagogy in the Indian educational context.

Queer Theory

Gaining currency in the early 1990s, queer theory challenges the dominance of heteronormative perspectives and resists hard categorical notions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Iisahunter, 2019). Michel Foucault's book *The History of Sexuality, Part I* (1979) pioneered queer theory. It provides a genealogy of how sexuality has been used as a tool for power (Meyer et al., 2022). Derrida's works (1986, 1993) laid the groundwork for queer theory, challenging the fixed binaries of gender and sexuality (Miller, 2017). In the book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler (1990) argues that most of our understanding of gender and, by extension, sexual orientation is based on time and place instead of being universal. Butler asserts that "the body appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed" (p. 12). Scholars like Rampton (2015) contend that queer theories developed in the West alongside feminism, as heteronormativity and heterosexism permeated both the first and second waves. It was only the third wave that began to focus explicitly on diverse experiences of gendered oppression and recognized fluid gender identities (Schuster, 2017; Yu, 2009).

Meyer et al. (2022) assert that there is no universally accepted definition of queer theory; "but it is based around questioning or queering the basic fundamentals of social institutions to better understand how these institutions oppress the other" (p. 569). Keenan and Hot Mess (2020) posit that queer theory can be used to examine how "often-impossible standards of normalcy" are constructed through institutional practices related to gender and

sexuality and through social expectations inextricably intertwined with gender hierarchy (p. 444). In her book, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use*, Sara Ahmed (2019) writes about the potential of queer use, which refers to how things can be used in ways that were not intended or by those for whom they were not intended. Queer theory endeavors to break down traditional ideas of what is normal and what is deviant by showing the queer in what is thought of as normal and the normal in what is seen as the queer (Tierney, 1997). In other words, queer theories rethink longstanding concepts, such as identity, gender, and sexuality to challenge heteronormative acts of domination and marginalization that uphold homophobia and heterosexism (Frank II & Cannon, 2010).

The 1990s were a period in which a form of academic work emerged to subvert, titillate, deconstruct, and 'queer' things in literature (Sedgwick, 1990), philosophy (Butler, 1990), history (Halperin, 1990), politics (Berlant, 1997), and education (Pinar, 1998), among others (Greteman, 2014). The term queer theory was initially installed by Teresa de Lauretis at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990 (Meyer et al., 2022). Since many queer people reject the idea of gender binary (i.e., gender as male and female only), de Lauretis and other scholars were dissatisfied with what they perceived to be the limitations of gay and lesbian studies (Pennell, 2020). Oakley (2016) acknowledges that queer is a form of identity construction that gives queer individuals a way to describe their "feelings, gender, and desires" and makes their queerness "recognizable" (pp. 9, 11). A queer identity implies that not everybody identifies as queer in the same way; it is deeply personal and valuable to individuals, and there should be a willingness to support others in articulating their own unique queerness (Vachovska, 2023).

Halperin (1995) recognizes queer as a unifying term adopted by varying gender and sexual identities, including lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, and gay, and gender identities, such as transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender fluid (Pennell, 2020). Historically, genderqueer and non-binary individuals were subsumed within the transgender umbrella (Stryker, 2008 as cited in Catalpa et al., 2019). Stachowiak (2017) argues that genderqueer individuals queer binary gender categories by ‘disidentifying’ with the gender binary (Muñoz, 1999). This means that genderqueer individuals “neither opt to assimilate within the [gender binary] structure nor strictly oppose it” (p. 11). Queer concerns itself with exposing the historic policing of what Butler (1990) termed the ‘heterosexual matrix’, which is “the reproduction of heterosexuality through the representation of bipolarized oppositions of sex, gender, and sexuality as the norm” (Jones, 2011, p. 164). Piantato (2016) claims that colloquially, the word ‘queer’ was used pejoratively with homosexuality with a strong homophobic overtone. This discourse was propagated through psychological research, religious ideologies, and the political privileging of heterosexual and monogamous family structures (Meyer, 2007).

Considering the history of the Western queer movement and activism, we can connect its roots to the gay liberation movement of the 1970s (Stein, 2022). The lesbian and gay movements that developed between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s continue through the gay, lesbian, and bisexual organizations that emerged between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s (Piantato, 2016). The contemporary Western queer movement and activism include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activism (Keenan, 2021; Piantato, 2016). Queer theory today is not just about queer beings who challenge norms of gender and sexuality and disrupt these boundaries; it is also about the histories and knowledge

systems that have oppressed and marginalized them as queer (Jung, 2024). Just like in the West, LGBTQ+ communities in India have also resisted norms and normativity around gender and sexuality against culture-specific issues within the country's heteropatriarchal society.

Queer Movements/Activism in India

Ancient India is often depicted as a time of sexual freedom (Gabler, 2012). The existence of homosexuality has been evident in Indian culture since prehistoric times, and it is evident in different art forms, including paintings, sculptures, and erotic carvings in the temples of Khajuraho, Ambernath Shiva, Bhuvaneshwar Rajarani, Bagali Shiva, and Konark (Ahuja, 2017). Many deities in Hinduism and Indian mythology are represented as both male and female at different times and in different incarnations or may manifest with characteristics of both genders at once, like the Ardhanarishvara (Sanyal & Maiti, 2018). Be it in mythology or texts, such as Kamasutra, Arthashastra, or Dharmashastra, India has a long association with queerness (Ahuja, 2017; Sanyal & Maiti, 2018). Besides, a third gender is described in ancient Vedic texts as males who have a female nature (Sanyal & Maiti, 2018). It was only with the advent of British rule in India that puritanical values were enforced, stigmatizing Indian sexual liberalism (Ahuja, 2017). Section 377, codified in 1860 during British rule, deemed homosexuality to be punishable with imprisonment from 10 years to life (Dixit, 2020; Singh, 2016).

The Indian queer movement, active since the early 1990s, had been geared mainly toward the legal decriminalization of homosexuality (Singh, 2016). Since then, it has increasingly organized around the principle of public visibility of same-sex identities (Bhan & Narrain, 2005). In her book, *Queer Politics in India: Towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects*,

Shraddha Chatterjee (2018) traces the origins of the queer movement in India in the late 1980s and early 1990s, pointing toward the first protests and queer rights organizations. Police raids targeting gay men at Central Park in Connaught Place, a ‘normal’ practice in those days, triggered the first recorded gay protest in India on August 11, 1992, similar to what happened in the Stonewall riots in the US³ (Krishnan, 2018; Varga et al., 2019).

However, the queer movement found support from the Indian film industry early on. Released in November 1998, the film *Fire*, based on same-sex love, can be seen as a milestone in the LGBTQ+ discourse in India (Nath, 2016). On the one hand, the expression of same-sex desire between women was deemed to be against Indian culture and led to violent protests by the Hindu right (Narain, 2004). On the other hand, it was the first time that lesbians openly came onto the streets of Delhi to contest the claim that same-sex desire was alien to Indian culture and challenge stark declarations that lesbians did not exist in India by asserting their presence in a public space (Kapur, 2000). Naisargi N. Dave’s book, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*, tells the story of a South Delhi disco called Soul Kitchen that opened its door to gays and lesbians in the city in the summer of 1999, the first ever ‘gay night’ for queer people in the city (2012). The book further chronicles the shifting landscape of lesbian organizing in India with a chapter on Sakshi, a group founded in New Delhi by pioneering lesbian activist Gita Thadani. Sakshi spent its early years responding to letters from women seeking epistolary respite from lives of compulsory heterosexuality (Rao, 2013). The term ‘compulsory heterosexuality’

³ The Stonewall riots are often viewed as the spark of the gay liberation movement in North America when, for the first time, various patrons at a gay bar fought back against police harassment and started a series of street protests (Varga et al., 2019).

describes the societal pressure to conform to heterosexual norms and behaviors, even if they do not align with a person's sexual orientation (Stoddard, 2023). In the same year, 1999, India's first Pride Walk took place in Kolkata, with only about 15 participants in attendance (Alagarsamy, 2019). Since 2003, pride parades have been held in several cities in India, including Bengaluru, Delhi, Chennai, and Kolkata (Chauhan et al., 2021).

The exclusion of homosexuality from the list of acts criminalized under Section 377 marked a pivotal moment in Indian queer activism (Singh, 2016). In 2009, the Delhi High Court's decision in *Naz Foundation v. Govt. of National Capital Territory of Delhi* firmly upheld that public morality cannot be grounds for the restriction of fundamental rights to privacy, autonomy, and dignity (Dixit, 2020). In a historic judgment, the Delhi High Court legalized consensual sexual acts between adults in private (Gopal, 2019). However, this did not last long, and Section 377 was reinstated by the Supreme Court in 2013 (Singh, 2016). In 2018, reversing its own court's 2013 judgment in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court read down Section 377, emphasized that protecting and affecting minority rights was a test of democracy, and asserted that ultimately constitutional morality will prevail over public morality (Gopal, 2019). The decriminalization of Section 377 was one of the incremental steps toward recognizing the injustice meted out to LGBTQ+ communities.

Parallel to these cases, in another significant judgment of the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) in 2014, the Supreme Court of India officially recognized a 'third gender' (Gulati & Anand, 2023). It affirmed the constitutional rights of transgender people, including the right to self-determination of gender, and enjoined the state to strive to protect the dignity of the transgender community (Arvind et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al.,

2017). The NALSA judgment became the bedrock of the transgender community's civil liberties in India (Desai, 2024). However, the Transgender Protection Act passed in 2019 that grants protection against discrimination has been heavily criticized. Specifically, it has been seen as problematic as it requires transgender people to obtain a certificate of identity and undergo gender-affirming surgery to assert their gender identity as male or female (Arvind et al., 2022). Notwithstanding these requirements, since the NALSA judgment, the success stories of transgender people have demonstrated a shift in popular perception, and some have recently been elected to public office. Madhu Bai Kinnar became the first transgender mayor to be elected in the city of Raigarh (Patkar, 2015). Kinnar's victory came only nine months after the NALSA judgment (Rahman, 2015). In another example, the government-sponsored Chhattisgarh AIDS Control Society appointed a transgender woman, Amruta Alpesh Soni, as an officer for its health camps among migrant laborers (Daftuar, 2015). In 2017, the city of Kochi hired 23 members of the transgender community to work in the ticketing, housekeeping, and crowd management departments for their public transit system (Doshi, 2017; Halim, 2017). Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is a leading voice for the community and is the first transgender person to represent Asia Pacific at the United Nations (Marik, 2021). Many others, like K. Prithika Yashini, the first transgender police officer; Padmini Prakash, the first transgender news anchor; and Rose Venkatesan, the first transgender TV show host, are some of the most iconic transgender community members in the country (Almeida, 2021).

In a recent development, on November 14th, 2022, two same-sex couples, Supriyo Chakraborty and Abhay Dang and Parth Phiroze Merhotra and Uday Raj Anand, filed writ petitions in the Supreme Court seeking recognition of same-sex marriages in India (Gupta,

2023; Zargar, 2023). The petitions were centered around the constitutionality of the Special Marriage Act (SMA) of 1954. Challenging India's secular marriage law, the SMA has been the most popular approach for realizing marriage equality in India (Agarwal, 2022). The SMA was aimed at facilitating inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, allowing couples to choose civil marriage over customary religious ceremonies (p. 172). The lawyers of the petitioners argued that existing legislation permitting citizens to marry someone of a different religion or caste under the SMA should now be amended to include those of any gender (Pandey, 2023). The Central Government, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), opposed the recognition of same-sex marriage in response to the petitions and told the Supreme Court that gay marriage is not compatible with the concept of an Indian family unit (Chaturvedi, 2023; Pasricha, 2023). It further stated that the notion of marriage itself presupposes a union between persons of the opposite sex (Iyer, 2023). The government continued by asserting that this definition is socially, culturally, and legally ingrained into the concept of marriage and should not be disturbed or diluted by judicial interpretation (Tripathi, 2023). The government also added that the Supreme Court cannot be asked to change the entire legislative policy of the country that is deeply embedded in religious and societal norms (Pasricha, 2023). On October 17th, 2023, the Supreme Court of India upheld the constitutionality of the SMA in its present form and held that the right to marry is not a fundamental right for queer people (Bhattacharya & Sachdev, 2023).

Despite setbacks, queer activists have been instrumental in paving the path for LGBTQ+ rights in the country. For instance, in 2011, Keshav Suri, a prominent LGBTQ+ activist and hotelier, opened a nightclub called 'Kitty Su' at one of his hotels in New Delhi

(Sandhu, 2019). Suri continues to open inclusive venues across the country where drag performers and queer singers and dancers have a space to reach a wider audience (Karia, 2023b). Another LGBTQ+ rights activist, Harish Iyer, has devoted his career to bringing the struggles of LGBTQ+ Indians into the mainstream and launched a radio talk show focusing on those issues (Bengali, 2018). These shifts in popular perceptions, claims to self-hood, and significant legal advancements or regressions are all indicative of an ever-growing queer politics unique to India, which is also reflected in formal and informal school discourses in the country.

From Theory to Context (Schools)

Queer pedagogy aims to understand classroom diversity, disrupt heteronormativity, and create inclusive environments by fostering a sense of belonging among all students (Lata & Singh, 2023; Thomas-Reid, 2018). A queer lens urges us to consider how heteronormativity – the societal assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that these identities are the default and therefore ‘normal’ – shapes our world (Meyer, 2007). Heteronormativity, according to Sanjakdar et al. (2015), is one of the key mechanisms of knowledge and power related to sex. Sex is institutionalized in school contexts and is subject to strict monitoring, surveillance, and regulation to discipline behavior, attitudes, and the use of bodies (Foucault, 1979 as cited in Sanjakdar et al., 2015). Queer-inclusive school practices include policies that protect LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families from discrimination. Reid (2023) asserts that positioning queerness as deviant or inferior makes it possible for LGBTQ+ students to suffer from increasingly negative experiences in school. Scholars like Cavanaugh, Alexander and Gaztambide-Fernández (2023) argue for queer inclusion that welcomes students as they come, knowing that we cannot know who

they are while “recognizing their right to opacity as authors of their own identifications” (p. 103). Heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and the resultant homophobia run deep in all institutions of Indian society, including schools (Singha & Chakrabarty, 2022). Considering that LGBTQ+ youth in India still struggle to express their sexual orientation and gender identities openly, queer theory can be applied as a framework to inform social justice education in ways that encourage us to question how our teaching practices and philosophies reinforce heterosexist social norms.

Several instances from India suggest that LGBTQ+ students are subjected to bullying, harassment, and discrimination based on their gender and sexual orientation (Lata & Singh, 2023). For instance, in February 2022, Arvey Malhotra, a 16-year-old student of one of Delhi’s elite schools, the Delhi Public School, died by suicide (Baral, 2022). It brought to the fore how LGBTQ+ students experience unwanted attention in Indian schools (Bhowal, 2022). This situation raised questions about the responsibilities of a school in safeguarding a child’s physical and mental health (Baral, 2022). Arvey had confessed to his mother (a teacher at the same school) that he was being bullied and sexually assaulted by boys at school (Bhowal, 2022). While hurtful slurs like ‘chhakka’ (a derogatory term for transgender people) and ‘ladikyon jaisa’ (effeminate) were being hurled at him since he was in the sixth grade, school authorities refused to act against the perpetrators even after his mother complained (Bhowal, 2022; Jain, 2023). For Shemba, initially raised as a boy, bullying started by teasing the six-year-old for walking in a supposed feminine way and progressed to stone-throwing when she began wearing girls’ uniform at the age of 10. She dropped out of school and never returned (Nagaraj, 2019). Where universities across the country follow the University Grant Commission’s (UGC) Regulation on Curbing the

Menace of Ragging in Higher Educational Institutions, 2009, there are no such guidelines for schools (Bakshi, 2022).

As schools in India struggle to find ways to curb bullying, harassment, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ students, education policies have not been swift in their decision-making. It took the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) several years after the NALSA verdict to come up with a training manual 'Inclusion of Transgender Children in School Education: Concerns and Roadmap' to make school education more inclusive (Ramesh, 2021). However, the manual was removed from its website following social media outrage and a request by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (Bhatnagar, 2021; Pradhan, 2022). One of the reasons for the backlash was the mention of puberty blockers and their availability for adolescents (Datta, 2021). The NCERT has shown determination since the backlash and is continuously working toward developing a manual to create an inclusive school environment for transgender children with a draft module that is still under review today (NCERT 2023a).

While the NCERT finalizes the draft module, individual schools in India have been taking the initiative to make their school environments inclusive of LGBTQ+ students. In June 2020, Bengaluru-based organization Pride Circle announced its #21DaysAllyChallenge, a global diversity and inclusion initiative (Bhandara, 2021). Tagore International School in Delhi was the only Indian school to participate (Pradhan, 2022). For over a decade, its students have been a permanent fixture in Delhi Pride, standing in solidarity with LGBTQ+ communities (Ramesh, 2020). In 2013, two students at this school, Sohini Chakrabarti and Safina Amin, founded *Breaking Barriers* (Chowdhury, 2015). The initiative aimed to support an awareness, rights, and sensitization

campaign for students from across the gender and sexuality spectrum (Sharma, 2017). *Breaking Barriers* has evolved into a movement, conducting sessions in other schools in collaboration with non-governmental organizations, like the Naz Foundation (Kumar, 2024).

In addition to *Breaking Barriers*, *Prism*, led by senior students with two teachers as advisors, is a gender and sexuality alliance (GSA)/support group with 21 members at Calcutta International School (Mazumdar, 2022). *Prism* started just before the COVID-19 pandemic to provide a safe space for those students who do not have an accepting home (Kumar, 2022). Although the school is committed to providing a safe environment for its LGBTQ+ students today, in 2018, Avijit Kundu, a teacher at the school, faced pressure to resign following the release of his autobiography *Amar Shamakami Ejahar* (My Homosexual Confession) at the Kolkata International Book Fair (Narayanan, 2020). These contrasting examples highlight both the progress and the challenges schools in India continue to face as they strive to create more inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ communities.

Pushing the boundaries of heteronormativity, the Valayanchirangara Government Lower Primary School in Kerala became the first school to introduce gender-neutral uniforms of shirts and three-fourth trousers, and in doing so, it set in motion a quiet revolution that is now sweeping across the state (Jacob, 2021). Celebrating Pride Month in June 2022, the Aditya Birla World Academy in Mumbai also introduced gender-neutral uniforms where students can choose between trousers or 'skort' (a hybrid of a skirt and shorts) as their uniform if they so desire (Das, 2022). The school and its branches have also decided to replace gender-sensitive terms like 'Welcome Ladies and Gentlemen' with 'Hello Everyone' and 'Dear Visitors' as a step toward inclusivity (Singh, 2022).

Several states across the country have developed trans-affirming pedagogy and schools by following the directives from the Supreme Court judgment of 2014. Keenan (2024) contends that trans-affirming pedagogy does far more than bringing trans people's personal stories into the classroom. Such a pedagogy is committed to enhancing understanding of the conditions of trans people's lives, extending beyond mere representation in classroom space (p. 2). Kerala became the first state to implement a comprehensive policy to enforce the constitutional rights of transgender people (Nayar & Vinu, 2023). Sahaj International in the state is India's first residential school for transgender people, helping adults who dropped out of school finish their education (Padanna, 2016). Founded by transgender activist and writer Kalki Subramaniam and run by six transgender activists, the school opened its doors to students on December 30, 2016 (Krishnan, 2017). In Maharashtra, Kinnar Vidyalaya is touted as the first school to cater specifically to the community (Khan & Sharma, 2021). The school offers free education to transgender children, tutored by transgender staff (Deshpande, 2022). In 2022, Karnataka's Department of School Education and Literacy scripted history by recruiting three transgender teachers in state-run schools (Belur, 2022). Out of 15,000 available positions, the state government reserved 1% (150 positions) for the community (Nazir, 2022).

Some other changes in the realm of education for transgender children include the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, enacted by the Government of India, which provides free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 and 14 (Government of India, 2009). Section 12 (1C) of the Act makes provision for a 25% reservation of children belonging to weaker sections and disadvantaged groups (Chhotaray & Pathak, 2022). In October 2014, Delhi's Lt Governor Najeeb Jung included transgender children in the

category of ‘children belonging to the disadvantaged category’ under the Act (Sharma, 2014). According to a press release from the Government of India in August 2022, 61,214 transgender children are enrolled in schools, with 5813 in Grade 10 and 4798 in Grade 12 (Government of India, 2022).

It is essential to emphasize understanding the existing diversity in school environments through an exploration of all genders and sexualities and creating an environment that fosters a sense of belonging among all students (Lata & Singh, 2023). Schools are important sites that contribute to the normalization of heteronormativity (Jose et al., 2023). Therefore, it becomes necessary to question and challenge dominant models in schools today so that socially favored groups are not the only ones visible. Queer pedagogy strives to confront and contest situations of apparent normality in classrooms and the social reproduction of what is learned.

One way we can think of queering in the academic environment is through a critical perspective on the teaching materials that we use in classrooms. I believe that a queer-inclusive curriculum includes sexuality education, which critiques the notion that education ought to only focus on heterosexual relationships and partnerships while failing to discuss any kind of sex that exists outside of reproduction. In India, sexuality education is primarily focused on producing heteronormative femininity and heteronormative masculinity, which is firmly cemented into the societal structure. ‘Queering’ or ‘to queer’ indicates that one is challenging, deconstructing, and questioning norms, particularly norms surrounding heteronormativity (Pennell, 2020). Queer pedagogy works toward making our school environments welcoming and inclusive for all students. While Indian

LGBTQ+ activists have been working hard to gain equal rights as heteronormative people for decades, I regard my current work as a way to support their cause and endeavors.

Furthering my multi-theoretical lens, it is important to expand my understanding of how schools may cultivate critical thinking and empower students as independent thinkers fostering social change and justice. For this purpose, in the next section, I discuss the pedagogical possibilities that critical pedagogy offers to teachers and its relevance in the Indian educational context.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy can be understood as an approach to education that seeks to transform oppressive structures in society using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning (Sanjakdar et al., 2015). McLaren (1999) describes it as a “way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relationships of the wider community, society and nation-state” (p. 454). Critical pedagogy sees schooling as a form of cultural politics since schooling always involves an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimization of certain ways of seeing and behaving in the world (Morgan, 2000). It is grounded on a social and educational vision of social justice and equity and examines how schooling affects the lives of students from marginalized groups, how teachers might relate to students, and how both relate to knowledge, thus constructing a new vision of understanding human possibility (Schiller, 2013). For example, a dialogue on oppression must not only focus on the individual lived experiences of the oppressor and the oppressed, but also on the ideological and sociopolitical contexts of oppression in which the lived experiences are embedded

(Pradhan & Singh, 2016). If teachers do not use critical pedagogy as a model for transforming education, schooling will remain focused on taming, controlling, and/or rescuing the least empowered students (Schiller, 2013). This is a pedagogy that begins by viewing students as individuals with immense capacities to be critical, knowledgeable, and informed citizens, workers, and social agents (Sinha, 2016).

First theorized in the 1970s, critical pedagogy entails identifying how existing curricula, resources, and teaching strategies provide students with a worldview that marginalizes particular voices and ways of living (Morgan, 2000). The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School argued that the kind of schooling, that encourages dependency and a hierarchical understanding of authority, effectively works to deskill students by denying them the opportunity to set their own goals (Sanjakdar et al., 2015). Since schooling involves power relationships and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge, these forms of knowledge reproduce social inequalities linked to racism, sexism, class discrimination, and ethnocentrism (Morgan, 2000). Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony explains how groups in power can maintain structures that benefit them by gaining the consent of subordinate groups (1995). In education, it is mostly done through subtle, yet powerful, messages that repeatedly permeate the daily life of students in schools.

Paulo Freire (1970), regarded as an influential philosopher of critical pedagogy, stated that all education is political, as it either perpetuates hierarchies of power or contests them. Freire claimed that the conventional banking approach to education, where educators deposit knowledge into passive students, replicates social control by delivering the dominant ideology to students who serve as receptive objects (Chubbuck, 2007). He believed that to effect social change and justice, people must engage in praxis that

combines theory, action, and reflection (Sanjakdar et al., 2015). It questions the knowledge as well as the method of delivery and asks: “Whose standard? Whose culture? Whose knowledge? Whose history? Whose language? Whose perspective” (Graziano, 2008, p. 154)? The task of critical pedagogy is for teachers and students to make explicit the socially constructed character of knowledge and ask whose interests particular ‘knowledges’ serves (Morgan, 2000). Giroux (2010) asserts that:

Freire was acutely aware that what makes critical pedagogy so dangerous to ideological fundamentalists, the ruling elites, religious extremists, and right-wing nationalists all over the world is that central to its very definition is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common-sense, and learning and social change. (p. 717)

Cho (2013) supports this and identifies critical pedagogy as a “project of anti-hierarchy democracy” as it breaks the hierarchical dichotomy between educator and learner (p. 88). A classroom that is truly democratic aims to increase student participation in school curricula to foster their intellectual curiosity (Shor, 1992). When students become co-investigators of knowledge instead of being just passive learners, education becomes a collaborative and cooperative process (Pradhan & Singh, 2016).

Even with all the benefits it brings, critical pedagogy has faced some criticism. Morgan (2000) argues that critical pedagogy fails to develop a viable form of educational practice and address issues of power and authority by synthesizing diverse political projects into a single discourse. Critics contend that critical pedagogy is more of a theory of

pedagogy informing educators about the underlying ideas that guide their work but offering little guidance on how to implement it or providing examples that schools might imitate (Graziano, 2008). Gore (1993) asserts that even some of the best writings lack strategies and the application of critical pedagogy that teachers might use in practice. Similar criticism of the concept of empowerment, which is important to critical pedagogy, is offered by Gore (1992), who claims that it requires teachers to do the work of empowering without providing concrete support or guidance (Graziano, 2008). Even in the face of criticism, Morgan (2000) contends that critical pedagogy does provide a set of ideas that teachers can use to explore new pedagogical possibilities, even if the tenets cannot be articulated in a general set of practices.

Critical Pedagogy and the Indian Context

The pedagogical practices of the Indian schooling system revolve around the concept of ‘rote learning’ in contrast to a pedagogy of critical thinking, student-centered, and democratic discourse, dialogue, empowerment, and emancipation (Das, 2021). To make the teaching-learning process interesting and learner-friendly, the Government of India has focused on learner-centered education for decades. The National Policy on Education of 1986 envisaged a learner-centered approach and recommended adopting “a child-centered and activity-based process of learning” (Government of India, 1998, p. 14). In addition, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 recommends “learning through activities, discovery and exploration in a child-friendly and child-centered manner” and “making the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety and helping the child to express views freely” (Government of India, 2009, p. 9). The Act constitutionally guarantees every child in India the right to learn in a child-friendly

environment that reflects constitutional values of equality and justice, free from fear, discrimination, and physical or mental harassment (Brinkmann, 2015). But despite these decades of plans and policies, learner-centered education is yet to be practiced in all schools in the country (Brinkmann, 2020). Das (2021) asserts that India's school education system has miserably failed to achieve the primary objective of education, which is helping students to know what to learn, enabling them to relate classroom learning with the cosmology of life reality, and developing critical thinking skills.

Education can foster a critical mindset or a reliance on authority in students, promoting autonomous thought patterns or passive deferral to authority (Graziano, 2008). For students to develop a critical and reflexive capacity and a collective consciousness of social change, they must question the asymmetries and hierarchical power relations in society. This study understands that existing curricula, resources, and instructional strategies must be carefully examined if students are to become critical actors in their own lives and foster social change and justice.

A useful basis for rethinking learner-centered education could be Freire's vision of a democratic education that views students as subjects who can engage in recreating their social world through dialogue, reflection, and action (Freire, 1970 as cited in Brinkmann, 2015). This form of 'anti-hierarchy democracy' involves student-centered work, where the teacher acts as a facilitator while also working to disrupt power dynamics and status hierarchies (Cho, 2013). Through deep reflection, young people, both with peers and individually, "question norms and limits" (Britzman, 1995) and "how they are implicated in issues" (Luhmann, 1998), such as heteronormativity and patriarchy. The questioning of heteronormativity and patriarchy should thus extend to the school itself as an institution

(Meyer, 2007) and to the role of the teacher as implicated in upholding institutional and societal norms (Britzman, 2012).

Bringing These Frameworks Together

For this study, I bring together feminist social theory, queer theory, and critical pedagogy as theoretical frameworks to examine the subtle or implicit ways in which dominant gender ideologies are taught to young people in Indian schools through the AEP curriculum. In addition, these theories also help me analyze how the teaching materials of this curriculum provide opportunities for young people to confront and question dominant social models that contribute to the adherence to rigid gender attitudes that remain pervasive in the country.

School curricula are among the first agents that shape gender identities (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). Since curricular practices in schools are related to societal expectations, it is imperative to identify and address gender imbalances perpetuated through these practices. Formal and informal school discourses on gender and sexuality in India are influenced by power relations and prevailing macro-discourses (Jose et al., 2023). Students imbibe gender and sexuality concepts through textbooks and classroom experiences, which reinforce their social perceptions (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). For instance, although every student is under surveillance and scrutiny in schools, many disciplinary actions are directed toward girls to enforce female modesty (Jose et al., 2023). The traditional salwar kameez as school uniform is “often tied to avoidance of risk surrounding the sexualization of their bodies” (Kannan, 2022, p. 808). This gaze, operationalized by patriarchal societal structure and gendered cultural norms, imposes expectations on girls and women to dress modestly to avoid sexually arousing boys and

men and to protect themselves from unwanted advances toward them. Besides, school uniforms are strictly made for two fixed gender identities while failing to identify and accept other forms of expression. Although such policies have been changing with the introduction of gender-neutral uniforms over the past five years, it is noteworthy that only a handful of schools have implemented them (Das, 2022; Jacob, 2021). Furthermore, it is primarily 'private' schools in the country making strides toward creating more inclusive learning environments for LGBTQ+ students (Kumar, 2024; Mazumdar, 2022).

It is against this background that the above-mentioned theories are essential to my study. The application of the theories to the analysis of the curriculum enables me to see if it encourages and engages youth to question and challenge not only their own positionality but also the positionality of their peers in the wider social structure. An inclusive sexuality education curriculum actively challenges the ways that gender hegemony is propagated in educational settings. Through the combined influence of these theories, I conduct this study with the belief that education is a form of political intervention and can create possibilities for individual and social transformation in school environments and the larger society (Lee & Johnstone, 2023).

Restructuring of the school curricula is particularly relevant within the Indian social ethos, where positive gendered constructs are required to reinforce attitudes of gender equality as well as to critique gender-based abuses against marginalized communities. The theoretical frameworks I employ for this study are not only introduced and defined in this section, but they also provide their historical contexts and applications in the Western and Indian socio-cultural environments.

Chapter Three: Review of Literature

I dedicate the first section of this chapter to a thorough examination of the literature on the historical context of sexuality education in India and the several challenges that have stood in the way of implementing it in schools nationwide. In the following section, I explore literature that provides a contemporary context of sexuality education. This includes the inadequacy of the curriculum, misconceptions about sexual knowledge as well as the desire for quality sexuality education among youth in India. Next, I inform my work with literature that describes the pervasive patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes and the implications they have on the daily lives of girls and women in India. Lastly, I analyze literature that delves into how the heteronormative social discourses in Indian society perpetuate discrimination and stigma toward LGBTQ+ communities. Through the exploration of relevant literature, this chapter provides in-depth knowledge and information that helps in understanding why a restructuring of the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) curriculum is crucial.

The Historical Context

The first attempts at sexuality education in India began as early as 1952 through a governmental family planning programme (Gabler, 2012). For decades, this policy focused exclusively on population stabilization and control (Vemula, 2011). In the 1980s, HIV/AIDS became a major concern (Gabler, 2012). The governmental bodies eventually recognized the importance of sexuality education, as a discourse, blaming uninformed youth for the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, circulated (Chatterji, 2020). It was only in 1994 that the focus shifted from demographic issues to the sexual behavior of youth, reproductive health and rights, and gender equity (Das, 2014).

The Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) was introduced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the National AIDS Control Organization in 2006 and was rejected by twelve states soon after objecting to the sexuality component (Malik, 2022). The media reported that the Ministry of Health was considering a ban on sexuality education in schools since it conflicted with Indian cultural values and might lead adolescents to irresponsible behavior (Daruwalla et al., 2018). Since the backlash, the curriculum has undergone multiple changes, and several versions of the programme run in different states (Gabler, 2012; Malik, 2022).

Sexuality education in India has historically been a contested terrain (Malik, 2022). Much of the political class has opposed it, calling it a ‘Western’ concept that conflicts with Indian cultural values (p. 707). Chakravarti (2011) notes that there were concerns that sexuality education might sexualize Indian children, leading to early sexual experimentation, as in the West. The controversy surrounding sexuality education relates to content, who should teach it, the appropriate age for delivery, and the mode and nature of instruction (Ballal et al., 2022). There are also differing views among teachers and parents due to a lack of clarity and consensus regarding its delivery (Ballal et al., 2022; Gabler, 2012). This leads to confusion for those delivering the curriculum and those receiving it, creating an additional barrier to the effective delivery of meaningful education (Ballal et al., 2022). Without concrete and compulsory guidelines, schools either refrain from engaging students on sexuality or organize their own sessions (Malik, 2022). These sessions, often in single-gender groups, may cover gender and basic biology, menstrual hygiene management (exclusively for girls), and promote the idea of abstinence and HIV/AIDS-based information, often without being allowed to use the word ‘sex’ (p. 708)

Arguments that position sexuality education in opposition to the cultural and moral ethos remain a big deterrent to its implementation across the country. Furthermore, these arguments often dissuade progressive members of political parties from taking a firm stand in favor of sexuality education (Das, 2014). Today, sexuality education continues to be taboo and a matter of conflict among different strata of Indian society to bring it back to mainstream education and acceptance (Pandey & Rao, 2023).

Sexuality Education in India

In the second section of this literature review, I begin by describing what sexuality education looks like in Indian schools in the present times. Next, I discuss patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes that constitute a major barrier to women's independence and empowerment in the country. Lastly, I delineate the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in contemporary India, including how they perceive school.

In a culturally diverse country like India, where regional customs, traditions, and beliefs have usually superseded scientific rationale, achieving consensus on a delicate subject such as sexuality education is a big challenge (Ballal et al., 2022). In her analysis of the AEP teacher curriculum, as revised in 2009-2010, Das (2014) found that the curriculum was inadequate. She pointed out that important content related to marriage, such as the right to not marry, to choose one's partner, and to decide when to marry were missing. The author believed that discussing sex exclusively within the context of conception and remaining silent about the needs and concerns of people with diverse sexual and gender identities leave the overall aims of comprehensive sexuality education unfulfilled. Comprehensive sexuality education (UNESCO et al., 2018) is defined as:

a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. (p. 16)

Malik (2022) asserts that this kind of sexuality education that is comprehensive, rights-based, contextual, and affirmative helps youth understand, engage in, and navigate their social environments. Similar to Das (2014), Chatterji (2020) conducted a study with 5 teachers and 18 students in two Kendriya Vidyalayas in Mumbai involving semi-structured interviews, group interviews, and document analysis of the AEP resource materials. Findings revealed that students did not have appropriate knowledge about sexual and gender minorities (particularly about transgender people), however, they expressed their interest in learning about LGBTQ+ communities. The study also suggested that teachers' personal beliefs and attitudes significantly influenced what content would be covered in their classrooms.

In India, an educational understanding of sexuality has been largely built around human biology (Malik, 2022). Therefore, young people do not find opportunities to “fearlessly and confidently learn about their bodies and relationships, recognize violations, challenge gender norms, or express their sexuality without shame or guilt” (p. 706). Kumar et al. (2017) carried out a cross-sectional study to identify the knowledge and attitude toward sexuality education involving 743 adolescents aged 13-19 years in Haryana through

a semi-structured questionnaire. Findings showed substantial lacunae in the knowledge about sexual health. Students felt that sexuality education is necessary and should be introduced in the school curricula. In another study, Zohourian et al. (2020) conducted 23 semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the sources of information, knowledge, and attitudes around sexual behaviors among young men aged 18 to 25 in Karnataka. The participants shared a desire for quality sexuality education in schools but described their current sexual health curriculum as inadequate. Since social taboos dictated the space in which students gained awareness of sexual topics, the participants resorted to outside information from both reliable and unreliable sources. Despite these gaps, O'Sullivan et al. (2019), through an anonymous online survey with 1140 Indian adults aged 18 and older, found widespread support for sexuality education. Most participants favored topics, such as sexual/reproductive parts, puberty, sexually transmitted diseases, and child sexual abuse prevention. However, fewer participants endorsed topics, such as sexual pleasure, homosexuality, sexual behavior, and sexual coercion. Although only a minority opposed teaching sexuality education in schools, their protestations may be significant enough to halt or hinder progress toward comprehensive sexuality education. This study reflects the influence of conservative views that are concerned with discussing aspects of sexuality that challenge traditional values.

As is evident from the above literature review, youth who participated in qualitative research in India desire quality sexuality education to be implemented in schools, however, this has not been accomplished thus far. Young people who have encountered the AEP curriculum have found it to be inadequate and have identified gaps regarding its content and delivery. Social taboos surrounding discussions and conversations in learning spaces

where young people gain knowledge on topics of sexual nature make it difficult for them to talk freely without hesitation or shame. In addition, conservative attitudes and beliefs impact what content or topics will be taught, forcing students to look for information elsewhere. To prevent young people from turning to unreliable sources of information, schools need to step up and make quality sexuality education mandatory.

My review of the existing literature on sexuality education in India suggests a need for a critical examination of the current official content of the AEP curriculum. The curriculum has undergone multiple changes since 2006, however, it still fails to meet the needs of young people in terms of their sexual health, for example, the knowledge and understanding of diverse sexual identities (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014; Malik, 2022). Well-designed sexuality education programmes where students can engage in discussions of a sexual nature without hesitation or shame, make accurate and reliable information on sexual health available, and are inclusive of and cater to all young people are crucial. Such programmes hold promise in promoting healthy knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors for in-school adolescents (Malik, 2022).

After exploring the context of sexuality education in schools in India, in the following section, I explore pervasive patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes that significantly hinder women's independence and empowerment in India.

Patriarchal Gender Norms in India

The documentary *India's Daughter*, based on the 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student, Jyoti Singh, captures the protests that followed both nationally and internationally after the incident (Shrivastava, 2021). This documentary throws light on the misogynistic and conservative patriarchal ideology in

India that nurtures various forms of gender-based violence, like rape (Maity, 2022). In the aftermath, politicians blamed the victim, claiming that she was asking for trouble by being out late at night with a male friend, revealing a victim blaming mentality (Nieder et al., 2019). Victim blaming refers to the act of blaming victims for a crime that was committed against them (Titus, 2018). When women experience violence, it is assumed that they must have done something wrong in not keeping themselves safe (Lange & Young, 2019). The assumption that women who are out late at night, wear Westernized clothing, and engage in Westernized behavior, such as premarital sex, are ‘asking for trouble’ represents a form of victim blaming mentality (Nieder et al., 2019). The most common explanation for why gender role traditionalists are more likely to place the blame on rape victims is because they believe the women engaged in behavior that violated established gender roles (Felson & Palmore, 2021).

The gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh not only revealed a threatening situation for women but also put on display how deeply patriarchal values and the low status of women are entrenched in Indian society (Nieder et al., 2019). As Chatterjee (2019) explains, the documentary shows the prevalence of rape and sexual violence against women in India; it demonstrates how being out in a public space is considered reason enough to violate them. In the documentary, the perpetrators justified raping the victim as a lesson for transgressing the patriarchal ideological framework (Maity, 2022). In the wake of the gang rape, reforms to the criminal laws concerning crimes against women were made by the Verma Committee (Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023). This signaled a shift in perspective by declaring that rape is “deployed as an expression of power” and expanding the definition of sexual assault (Titus, 2018, p. 233). These revisions faced some criticism for their failure

to include certain recommendations of the Committee, including the failure to criminalize marital rape (Deosthali et al., 2022). Marital rape is difficult to conceive in India as marriage remains practically a license over a woman's body and sexuality (Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023). The existing definition of rape excludes marital rape due to patriarchal values and gender norms that define the 'duties' of a wife and exempt it based on implied consent (Deosthali et al., 2022). Notwithstanding this criticism, the swift changes made by Indian legislation to the laws concerning gender-based violence and assault were seen as a sign of progress and a change in the perception of women's freedom and safety (Titus, 2018).

The New Year's Eve 2016 assaults on women in Bengaluru called into question the effectiveness of the reforms against sexual violence (Qureshi, 2017). Sexual harassment of women and girls in public spaces by men and boys has been documented as a pervasive issue in India (McCammon et al., 2022). Commonly referred to as 'eve-teasing' in India, sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence that is associated with inequitable gender norms (Zietz & Das, 2018). While the word 'eve' in 'eve-teasing', which is also a form of victim blaming, alludes to the biblical story of Eve tempting Adam to stray from the path of righteousness (Mohanty, 2013), the word 'teasing' is emblematic of mere playfulness rather than an invasion of a woman's personal space (Misri, 2017). Although the term eve-teasing is widely used in India, it trivializes the serious issue of sexual harassment of women (Natarajan, 2016). Sexual harassment is psychologically distressing, causing fear, anxiety, shame, negative body image, and self-blame while also limiting women's daily lives and their full participation in school or work (McCammon et al., 2022).

Historically, sexuality education programmes for young people in India have failed to take a particularly nuanced approach to patriarchy and gender norms (Daruwalla et al., 2018). Gender norms are often defined as culturally shared expectations about the characteristics that women and men should possess and how they should behave (Yu et al., 2017). This encompasses the socially acceptable standards of traits, behavior, and power associated with femininity and masculinity in a culture (Kågesten et al., 2016). When patriarchal gender norms are firmly upheld, they can result in the legitimization of sexual violence by men and the subtle acceptance of such violence by women as a normal part of their everyday lives and relationships (Nieder et al., 2019).

Socially, adolescents are often subjected to strict gender-based expectations regarding their behavior that are enforced in school, family, peer, and community settings (Bansal et al., 2021). Boys have more freedom in terms of their clothing, activities, and mobility (Hebert et al., 2020). Conversely, girls are closely monitored by families and communities, and acceptable activities, clothing, and mobility outside the home are determined by a rigid set of gender norms that dictate appropriate behavior (McCammon et al., 2022). To examine gender stereotypes in school curricula, Košir and Lakshminarayanan (2023) analyzed the visual representations in 45 social science textbooks in India. Their findings revealed that gender structure in Indian society remains predominantly androcentric and asymmetric. Women are underrepresented in images or portrayed in subservient, submissive, or passive roles as caregivers or performing household chores, while men are depicted in professional and leadership roles. This is reflective of the rigid gender roles that are enforced in Indian society. The study also noted minimal effort to challenge power asymmetries or question existing gender equations.

In most Indian familial settings, parents/families struggle to negotiate the possibilities provided by mobile phones in culturally appropriate ways. The access to the outside world that mobile phones offer creates a moral panic by threatening traditional gender norms, sexual control of girls, and socially sanctioned marriage and motherhood by opening the possibilities of romantic transgression. Families' anxieties pertain to maintaining social respectability through the sexual control of girls, where marriage and motherhood are valued over employment and individualistic independence. Consequently, parents/families enforce policing, constraining, and surveilling the use of mobile phones by young women (Bhallamudi, 2022). McCammon et al. (2022) contend that the enforcement of rigid gender norms in adolescence leads to risk-taking and violence perpetration in boys and to poor mental health, shortened education, early marriage and pregnancy, and vulnerability to sexual violence and coercion in girls.

Indian society and culture consider a woman's social status to be dependent on her marriage. Traditionally, a dowry was a voluntary marriage gift from a bride's family to the groom at the time of marriage. Over time, it has become a mandatory demand and has resulted in the harassment of women in the form of verbal abuse, guilt, neglect, violence, rape, or even murder, often occurring when the dowry brought in by the woman does not meet the expectations of the groom and his family (Lathabhavan et al., 2023; Mitchell & Soni, 2021). Dowry-related problems cause significant mental health issues in women, including "fear, loss of identity, loss of self-respect, suicidal ideation, and inability to share emotions with others" (Lathabhavan et al., 2023, p. 180). The Dowry Prohibition Act, implemented in 1961, criminalized the giving or receiving of a dowry (Lodhia, 2009). Since 1983, Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code provides for criminal penalties against

a husband or his relatives who subject a woman to cruelty (Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023). Despite stringent prohibition laws, there has been an increase in dowry-related violence and harassment in recent years (Lathabhavan et al., 2023).

According to Saravan, (as cited in Nieder et al., 2019) men in India seem to go through a socialization process in which they internalize gender norms like domination and control, while women are encouraged to internalize those of submission and subservience. Intimate partner violence (IPV) primarily manifests as an expression of male dominance, legitimized within the family and society through established structures of authority and power (Sinha et al., 2023). Studies in India indicate that IPV remains pervasive in society and threatens the well-being of women (Mondal & Paul, 2023). Dhanaraj and Mahambare (2022) investigated the relationship between a married woman's paid work participation and her exposure to IPV in India using data from a nationally representative household survey database. Findings showed that women in paid work experience higher IPV than those who are not engaged in paid work. They found that women in paid work are more likely to accept IPV, less likely to think they do not have the right to refuse sex with their husbands, and more likely to experience a higher degree of marital control from their spouses. It was also revealed that to cope with the guilt of not living up to the stereotypical image of a married woman, they indulge in a destructive compensatory behavior of justifying IPV perpetrated by their husbands. Sinha et al. (2023) explored the pathways between childhood socialization and IPV using data from Youth in India: Situation and Need Study for 5573 young married men aged 15 to 29. Their findings showed that men's use of physical violence on their partners is significantly driven by witnessing their mothers being abused, indicating an element of social learning since childhood. This study

highlights the importance of targeting gender education in schools that could enable youth to question gender stereotypes and break the chain of intergenerational transmission.

A review of related literature indicates that sexist attitudes and gender inequities persist in the conservative Indian societal structure (Bhallamudi, 2022; Lathabhavan et al., 2023; Maity, 2022; McCammon et al., 2022). Hebert et al. (2020) explored the effect of gender on the daily life and future expectations of 50 young women in Uttar Pradesh aged 15 to 24 through story circles. Young women told stories of romantic relationships being prohibited by families and communities as parents and brothers use corporal punishment or other forms of abuse to prevent them from interacting with young men. They also shared that they have little control over selecting potential partners as families decide when and whom they marry. Bansal et al. (2021) conducted a study with 30 girls and 10 boys (ages 15-17) that focused on how Indian adolescents experience gender-based discrimination using an interactive storytelling game that showed similar findings. Female participants shared that romantic relationships are considered a source of shame and fear for their families. The researchers found that even if romantic relationships are stigmatized and forbidden, they are happening as participants described secret ways in which girls and boys meet each other. This shows that romantic relationships are of interest to young people, as they engage in them even without the knowledge or approval of their parents and families. This necessitates equipping young people with healthy romantic relationship skills that are necessary for navigating their romantic and dating lives.

Positive changes in attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships are possible through participation in gender-focused interventions. Verma et al. (2006) conducted a pilot intervention called Yari-Dosti (friendship) with 126 young men aged 18-

29 in Mumbai. The study aimed to promote gender equity by involving pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys using the Gender Equitable Men Scale, interviews, and observations. Findings indicated that gender-based interventions can positively influence attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships by engaging young men in critical discussions about gender dynamics and norms. The authors recommend that openly discussing these topics should form part of universal sexuality education in India. This study presents information relevant to my study in supporting my rationale that education is a site for intervention.

Given that significant gender inequities persist in Indian society, it is critical to intervene in adolescence if gender equity is to be established. In support of this, a cross-sectional study evaluating gender-equitable attitudes collected data using a 75-item questionnaire from girls and boys in grades 5-9 in public schools in northern India. The study indicated that the construction of gender attitudes and perceptions of gender norms occurs during adolescence. It also suggested that increasing awareness and sensitizing boys on the discrimination girls face in their communities may yield both short-term and long-term benefits, as they may become supporters instead of barriers in a girl's life (Landry et al., 2020). This study demonstrates the necessity of integrating gender-sensitive curricula for youth to narrow gender inequity gaps.

Patriarchal structures have existed through civilizations, and consequentially, women have lagged in education, employment, and political participation in India (McCammon et al., 2022). Emanating from childhood, gender inequality is reinforced through discrimination and limited opportunities, constituting a major barrier to women's advancement and empowerment (Bansal et al., 2021). The mindset and attitudes that exist

within communities, consciously and subconsciously, become an obstacle in a girl's life (Bhallamudi, 2022; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023).

My review of existing literature on patriarchy and gender roles in India shows that socio-cultural factors, deep-rooted gender norms, and their influence on the behavior of women and men have contributed to a subordinated and disempowered position of women (McCammon et al., 2022). These factors have perpetuated different forms of gender-based violence against girls and women (Nieder et al., 2019; Titus, 2018). Sexuality education programmes for youth have not particularly taken a nuanced approach to address the structural and power inequities that girls and women face in Indian society (Daruwalla et al., 2018). This necessitates a critical analysis of the perpetuation of patriarchal gender norms and attitudes within the AEP curriculum (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014). Such analysis is particularly pertinent within the Indian social ethos, where the legitimization of gender-based violence by men and its acceptance by women is problematic (Deosthali et al., 2022; Dhanaraj & Mahambare, 2022; Nieder et al., 2019). Positive gender attitudes that reflect voices of resistance in their opposition to the patriarchal system are required for adolescents to critique gender power dynamics (Landry et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2006). There is a need for a concerted effort to eliminate textual discourses in the curriculum that are discriminatory, portray women as weak, socially inferior, irrelevant, incapable of decision-making, and therefore denied full participation in public spheres (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). Unless such transformation is mediated through stringent intervention, gender inequities will continue to persist (Landry et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2006). Gender sensitization and empowerment programmes, such as sexuality education

aimed at young people, precisely at the time when they are forming their gender attitudes, have the potential to diminish gender inequity.

It is with this understanding of gender power dynamics and asymmetries that I further explore the literature on the heteronormative social discourses in Indian society that perpetuate discrimination and stigma toward LGBTQ+ communities.

Heteronormativity in India

The decriminalization of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code has not been able to eradicate the stereotyped notions regarding consensual same-sex relationships (Gopal, 2019). Pufahl et al. (2021) assert that even though the verdict created space for conversations on LGBTQ+ rights, there is much to be accomplished as the socio-cultural landscape in India remains largely heteropatriarchal, with unfavorable attitudes toward LGBTQ+ communities. Stigma, discrimination, and oppression affect the mental and physical health of sexual minorities due to devalued social identities (Srivastava, 2021). Owing to this, the LGBTQ+ movement in India has grown visible over the last decade. Although the Supreme Court of India rejected a plea to legalize same-sex marriages, it has urged the Central Government to uphold the rights of the queer community and end discrimination against them (Yasir & Travelli, 2023). Such recent advances in the history of LGBTQ+ rights in India make this research study particularly significant in this regard.

While it is yet to be seen how the Hindu nationalist government will contemplate extending legal rights and privileges to same-sex couples, schools in India continue to use ‘heteronormalizing techniques’ to render heterosexuality the norm and same-sex desires a deviance (Allen, 2004). Reflecting this broader societal context, Jose et al. (2023), through interviews with 9 high school teachers, investigated how schools use the discipline of

biology to establish normative notions of gender and sexuality in Kerala. They found that discussions beyond the purview of biology are discouraged, with biology positioned as providing students with the ‘correct’ and ‘true’ knowledge about sexuality. Their work also revealed that students who do not conform to the ‘preferred sexualities’ are advised, punished, and pressured to render acceptable behaviors. Two themes emerged from this study indicating how schools monitor students ‘undesired’ sexualities and the sexualities of ‘undesired’ students. Similar findings arose in a study conducted at a school in West Bengal. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 25 adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years, Sur (2021) found that the pervasive force of heteronormativity was evident in this school. Same-sex attraction and relationships were considered not normal, a sin, and biologically unnatural. This study revealed how little emphasis is placed on sexual diversity in Indian schools, which encourages homophobia and makes it more difficult for children to come out as lesbian or gay later in life.

To study the attitudes of people toward homosexuality in Delhi, Anand (2016) used a mixed methods approach, involving 336 participants (168 males and 168 females). Several recurring themes emerged, such as the perception that homosexuality is a mental illness, is against Indian culture, is criminal behavior, and discrimination against homosexuals. However, other themes reflected more progressive views, including the need for awareness about homosexuality, support for freedom of choice regarding one’s sexuality, advocacy for legalization, sympathy toward homosexuals, and the belief that homosexuality is natural. These themes reflected a diversity of opinions, where younger people showed a significantly more positive attitude toward homosexuality as compared to older adults. Similarly, Srivastava and Singh (2015) examined the factors related to the

negative attitudes of society toward sexual minorities and the impact of such stigmatization on their lives in Delhi and Kolkata. The study showed the existence of stigmatization and oppression within families and in wider society. Common factors driving negative attitudes included viewing homosexuality as anti-normative, unnatural, influenced by bad spirits, a result of psychological disorders, and rooted in a lack of understanding and knowledge about homosexuality.

The journey of ‘coming-out’ to family and friends has been described as an essential component in LGBTQ+ sexual identity formation and integration (Achar & Gopal, 2023). To explore the dynamics of disclosure or ‘coming-out of the closet’, Biswas et al. (2022) recorded the lived experiences of 25 individuals aged 18 to 35 identifying as gender and sexual minorities in West Bengal. It was found that despite facing confusion and dilemma, many of them decided to reveal their sexuality and/or gender identities to their parents and peers so they could live without pretension. After initial rejection, experiencing parents’ attitude change was marked as one of the most rewarding outcomes by most participants. Life outside the closet was viewed as happier and more satisfactory, as not hiding their identity provided mental peace and control over their own lives. In a similar study, Achar and Gopal (2023) gathered detailed narratives of disclosure from 5 males and 5 females, aged 18 to 25, in India. The study found that participants felt that coming-out reduced them to their sexual orientation, preventing them from wanting to disclose their sexual orientation. Another recurring theme was the fear of dismantling family traditions and values. Participants reminisced about how they decided to keep their sexual orientation a secret because they did not want to feel responsible for the degeneration of their family traditions and values. Despite these concerns, participants

noted that a positive first experience of coming-out was crucial in the dissolution of the anxiety accompanying disclosing their sexual orientation to anyone else.

These findings show that even though little emphasis is placed on sexual diversity in schools and there is a dearth of understanding about LGBTQ+ people, young people are more accepting of these communities. These studies also reveal how important it is for these communities to find family, peer, and community support. This highlights the significance of providing young people with information about LGBTQ+ communities. This knowledge can alleviate the confusion experienced by these communities and eliminate the stigma and discrimination associated with non-normative identities.

Educational and community-based interventions may prove effective in challenging prejudice and fostering allyship toward LGBTQ+ communities in India. For instance, Ahuja et al. (2019) conducted an experimental study involving 164 heterosexual college students in Delhi, assessing the effectiveness of an intervention through perspective-taking, education, and direct contact with people who identify as lesbian and gay. The study observed that views toward the queer community considerably improved in the experimental group after the intervention. The control group also showed a significant, but small, improvement in attitudes. This study demonstrates how a one-time session can effectively reduce prejudice. Similarly, Pufahl et al. (2021) evaluated the effectiveness of community-based theatre intervention on the attitudes and awareness of LGBTQ+ communities in Mumbai (Pufahl et al., 2021). The study indicated that heterosexual audiences aged 18-24 express more willingness to act as allies and oppose homophobia. These findings underscore the potential of such interventions to encourage dialogue and prosocial attitudes. They can be applied across different settings in India, such as

educational institutions, as part of diversity and inclusion training curricula. Both studies further support my rationale that education serves as a site for intervention, playing a key role in reducing bias and fostering inclusion (Ahuja et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021).

Prejudice and discrimination, along with legal and social barriers to social participation, create a stressful, threatening, and negative social environment for LGBTQ+ individuals in India (Srivastava, 2021). According to Pufahl et al. (2021), the lack of political will to protect these communities against stigma and discrimination poses barriers to implementing protective policies. They contend that a lack of quality sexuality education in schools leaves limited scope for redressing stereotypes that can be damaging to these communities. It is crucial to educate society about LGBTQ+-related issues in the Indian-specific context to further acceptance and greater empathy (Ahuja et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021).

A review of the existing literature on heteronormative social discourses in the Indian socio-cultural environment suggests that a lack of understanding and knowledge about LGBTQ+ communities leads to stigma and discrimination toward them (Anand, 2016; Srivastava & Singh, 2015). Therefore, there is a pressing need to focus on the lacuna in the AEP curriculum related to LGBTQ+ communities. Such emphasis is crucial in the Indian context, where schools, through their ‘heteronormalizing techniques’, render heterosexuality the norm and same-sex desires a deviance (Allen, 2004; Jose et al., 2023; Sur, 2021). The AEP curriculum can operate as a powerful tool for deepening conversations and creating space for reflection when discussing gender inequality (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014). Besides, it would make more sense to include such discourses in schools, as young people are more accepting of these communities (Anand, 2016; Pufahl

et al., 2021). Understanding these absences may lead to a better understanding of the discrimination, oppression, and lack of support and acceptance experienced by these communities amongst heterosexual youth and bring them in as allies in the fight for equal representation and rights (Ahuja et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021).

After exploring the literature on the heteronormative social discourses in Indian society, I delve deeper into how transgender people and communities are constructed discursively in the Indian socio-cultural environment.

Discourse and Identity Construction of Transgender People in India

In the political and judicial discourse, the categories ‘transgender’ and ‘hijra’ have almost always been positioned interchangeably, even though hijras are only one of the wide varieties of gender nonconforming communities in India (Sharma, 2022). Hijra culture has existed since the 9th century BC, however, they have long been social pariahs, stigmatized explicitly based on their gender identification and location beyond the realm of procreative sexuality (Arvind et al., 2022; Sharma, 2022). Although hijras are culturally respected and considered holy to bless a newborn or a new house, they have poor living conditions (Pandya & Redcay, 2021). They are excluded from society, denied jobs, work at low-paying jobs, or forced to sustain themselves by begging, ceremonial collections by dancing and singing on auspicious occasions like marriages or childbirth, or sex work, and are verbally and physically abused (National Human Rights Commission, 2018 as cited in Pandya & Redcay, 2021). Despite their visible presence for centuries, understanding of transgender people in India is limited, which partly accounts for the stigma and discrimination faced by them from their biological families and the wider society (Chakrapani et al., 2017).

Gender transitioning is an integral part of the hijra experience and is key to helping transgender people develop a physical body congruent with their gender identity (Arvind et al., 2022). In line with this, Srivastava et al. (2021) used a life history calendar approach with 20 hijra-identified individuals in Mumbai to understand transitioning as a process of achieving congruency with one's gender identity and to examine various events, people, and experiences that have influenced this process. The authors believed that reflecting on, recalling, and re-examining their life events may also be an empowering process for the participants. Most participants recounted childhood experiences of abuse at home and school. One participant talked about getting beaten up and not being allowed to go to school after being found cross-dressing, an experience echoed by other participants. Some participants discussed expectations around transitioning, which included looking good, appearing feminine, and, in some cases, being hijra. Participants also explained how transitioning affected their mental health, with one participant describing it as a way to feel more confident and comfortable in their skin. Despite facing a lack of family acceptance regarding their transitioning, some participants remained affirmative of their decision. In another study, Chakrapani et al. (2022) explored transmasculine people's experiences in affirming their gender in family and social spaces and how those experiences impacted their mental health. The researchers conducted four focus groups and 10 in-depth interviews with 17 transmasculine people in Mumbai and Chennai. They found that the pressure to conform to assigned gender roles and gender policing within the family usually began in adolescence and increased over time. Some participants tried to balance family expectations with the desire to freely express their gender identity. Experiences in the workplace varied, depending on whether participants were visibly transgender or had an

incongruence between their identity documents and gender identity. Those who voluntarily disclosed their gender identity to coworkers experienced both positive and negative outcomes. Positive outcomes included increased understanding, acceptance, and support. Participants perceived social support from family and friends as protective against mental health problems and contributed to increased self-esteem and self-acceptance. These studies underscore the need for gender-affirming and stigma-reduction interventions to reduce the pervasive stigma and discrimination experienced by transgender people in India and to promote their inclusion and well-being.

Multiple pathways of entry into sex work for transgender women in India include (a) societal stigma and lack of family support leading them to join hijra communities (gharanas), with sex work as a tradition in certain gharanas; (b) discrimination in schools and colleges, resulting in low formal education and limited job opportunities; and (c) decreasing income from community-specific livelihood options (e.g., begging or dancing), employment discrimination, and underpayment in formal and informal sectors (Chakrapani et al., 2018). To ensure their study was relevant to transgender sex workers' issues and needs, Ganju and Saggurti (2017) involved members of the transgender sex work community in the research process. This included training interviewers on sensitive issues, providing feedback on the study guide, identifying areas where community members congregate, recruiting respondents, and assisting in the interpretation of initial results. In-depth interviews were conducted with 68 self-identified transgender individuals who engaged in sex work in Maharashtra. The study explored their experiences with stigma and violence and their coping strategies. Findings showed that the respondents face pervasive stigma and violence, which reinforce and intersect with social inequities, including

economic and housing insecurity, employment discrimination, and poverty. They emphasized the importance of peer support within the transgender community and the supportive role of local non-governmental organizations. To build supportive norms and challenge transgender-related stigma, the study suggests that communities must raise awareness of transgender rights and work toward integrating this marginalized group into society.

In India, over 40% of transgender women report a lifetime prevalence of depression, compared to 4%-15% lifetime prevalence in the general population (Srivastava et al., 2023). To examine the experience of psychological distress, social strain, and gender dysphoria in transgender women and their reflections on their gender identities, Arvind et al. (2022) used a mixed methods approach with 20 participants in Gujarat. The study indicated a strong link between psychological distress and social strain due to various psycho-social-cultural factors. This distress, compounded by both enacted and internalized stigma, forced them to walk out of their families during childhood. The authors believe that educational anti-stigma interventions can help correct myths, inaccurate stereotypes, and misinformation among the public. Similar findings were observed in a cross-sectional study with 1366 transgender women from Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. The study examined the association between gender transition status, sex work, family rejection, and depressive symptoms. The findings suggested that being in sex work, undergoing transition, and family rejection amplify stress, resulting in poor mental health. The pressure to hide their sexual orientation and conform to societal, sexual, and gender expectations, including being forced into marriage, compelled them to leave their families. This study shows a need for community-led processes and advocacy initiatives at

local, state, and national levels to change attitudes and laws to increase family acceptance, educational outcomes, and employment opportunities for transgender women in India. It also validates a need for more inclusive educational curricula and programming (Srivastava et al., 2023). It is hard to deny that even though transgender people have been recognized legally in India since 2014, their path to attaining full status socially and economically as a ‘third gender’ is tainted with several challenges and hurdles. Transgender individuals in India continue to experience immense psychological stressors, stigma, and violence (Arvind et al., 2022; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Srivastava et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023).

My review of the existing literature on the construction of discourse and identity formation of transgender people and communities in Indian society suggests that there has been much research on gender affirmation and its associated positive outcomes, such as identity pride, and negative outcomes, such as discrimination, harassment, and stigmatization (Arvind et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2022; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Srivastava et al., 2021). However, there is a need to examine how these experiences are erased in textual discourses in school curricula, specifically in the AEP curriculum (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014). Such analysis is critical in the Indian context, where transgender people still experience stigma, discrimination, and violence (Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Srivastava et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023). There is a need to educate heteronormative adolescents by presenting affirming information about transgender people in the Indian-specific context. This will help correct myths, inaccurate stereotypes, and misinformation, as well as sensitize heteronormative peers to transgender identities and issues and make space for gender nonconformity and euphoria (Arvind et al., 2022;

Chakrapani et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021). In this way, transgender students may receive peer support that can act as a counterbalance to the discrimination, rejection, and isolation that these students experience at school and in the larger community (Arvind et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021). While transgender people may continue to face marginalization and stigma in India, these interventions can empower students to resist and challenge such discrimination (Chakrapani et al., 2017).

Moving Forward

Several studies have been conducted on the lack of quality sexuality education in schools in India and its effectiveness in providing adequate knowledge about sexual health (Chatterji, 2020; Das, 2014; Kumar et al., 2017; Zohourian et al., 2020). There is, however, a lack of research studies specifically dedicated to analyzing and examining gender hierarchies and dominant gender ideologies embedded in the AEP curriculum and its associated teaching resources.

To design effective school-based interventions for adolescents, it is crucial to understand gender within their socio-cultural contexts (Bansal et al., 2021). In adolescence, perceptions about gender norms are still malleable as they become increasingly aware of the expectations they must fulfill as a woman and a man and face increasing pressure to conform to the appropriate gender roles of society (Landry et al., 2020). Limited research examines the formation of gender attitudes in adolescents in India, despite the severity of gender inequity in its highly heteropatriarchal social environment (Dhar et al., 2019). Education can provide students with opportunities to explore and reconsider their attitudes toward gender and dominant gender norms, offering critical alternatives within a prevailing climate of heteropatriarchy (Landry et al., 2020). Therefore, integrating discussions on

gender attitudes in school curricula could be vital for the healthy development of adolescents and to challenge inequitable and restrictive gender norms. The AEP curriculum presents an excellent opportunity to achieve these goals, as it includes a module committed to the theme of ‘Gender Equality’. This module aspires to encourage its learners to develop knowledge and skills to counter gender-based stereotypes, discrimination, and violence, practice positive gender roles, and promote gender equality and rights for everyone. However, it may be imperative to make the curriculum more robust by dismantling and deconstructing problematic issues, such as patriarchy and gender hierarchies. This is essential for ensuring our future generations grow up in an environment that is free from harassment, violence, oppression, and discrimination against women and LGBTQ+ communities.

With this motivation in mind, I devote the next chapter to elaborating on the research methodology for this study to critically analyze the power dynamics in the AEP curriculum and address my research question: How is the national curriculum of the AEP in India influenced by dominant discourses of gender and sexuality? Further, I describe my data collection methods, highlighting my rationale for choosing specific methods for data-gathering. Lastly, I also include a detailed description of my processes for data analysis.

Chapter Four: Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss the methodological tools I bring to critically examine the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) curriculum used in schools in India. I begin with an overview of Thematic Document Analysis and explain my reasons for focusing on official government documents for my inquiry. Next, I provide a detailed description of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a research methodology and discuss my rationale for choosing this particular methodology. I also discuss why this methodology works best for this study. Then, I delineate the processes of my data collection methods. Lastly, I describe the analytical steps I employ to identify, analyze, examine, and interpret themes within the qualitative data collected.

Thematic Document Analysis

As Sankofa (2022) explains, official government documents, as a tool of power, can play “an agentic role in systemic and institutionalized oppression” (p. 1). She argues that documents can be an exercise of power by an individual, group, or institution to enforce hegemonic norms, behavioral expectations, and values. Therefore, documents must be examined for what they do as much as what they say. Dismantling systemic and institutionalized oppression requires a critical examination of documents in a manner that elevates the lives of subjugated communities. This study aims to analyze how discourses and language in the AEP curriculum document perpetuate social and political inequalities through different strategies, tactics, and structures.

Yin (2009) asserts that documents are the most stable source of evidence, as they can be reviewed repeatedly. Some theorists warn against excessive reliance on documents (Bowen, 2009). Others maintain that documents are a ubiquitous yet largely unnoticed part

of our everyday lives that require a systematic analytic focus across research traditions (Rapley & Jenkins, 2010).

For this study, I chose document analysis as the primary method of data analysis as it can reveal meaning, contribute understanding, and illuminate insights relevant to my specific area of inquiry. Analyzing documents incorporates coding content into patterns or themes in a manner similar to how transcripts of focus groups or interviews are analyzed (Bowen, 2009). For instance, when looking at documents to understand why young women often choose not to discuss or disclose experiences of sexual harassment in India, potential thematic codes could be the issue of victim blaming in Indian society, fear of dishonoring their families, or consequences leading to restrictions on their educational or career opportunities enforced by parents and families.

In document analysis, processes include locating, selecting, assessing, and integrating data contained in documents (Bowen, 2009). The inquiry often incorporates thematic analysis (TA) as a practical method to organize data. For my study, I reposition official documents by treating them as ‘informants’ that build up an idea of being ‘actors’ (albeit inanimate) in their own right (Prior, 2008). After selecting information in the documents, I employ TA to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Phases of TA are similar to the phases of other qualitative research methods, so these stages are not necessarily all unique to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As Clarke and Braun (2017) argue:

TA provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data. Codes are the smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data (potentially) relevant to the research

question. Codes are the building blocks for themes, (larger) patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organizing concept – a shared core idea. Themes provide a framework for organizing and presenting the researcher’s analytic observations. The aim of TA is not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question. (p. 297)

Braun and Clarke (2006) state that “the ‘keyness’ of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (p. 82).

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of TA is a constructionist approach that looks at latent themes that are imbued with ideologies and seeks to theorize the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions in “connecting everyday discourses with larger social and cultural practices nested in unequal power relations” (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 93). In other words, TA creates possibilities for examining how events, realities, meanings, and experiences are influenced and shaped by various discourses operating within society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA can also be used within a critical framework to interrogate patterns or themes within social meanings around a topic and to ask questions about the implications of these meanings (Clarke & Braun, 2017). TA is suited for integration with critical perspectives, especially as an analytical approach in qualitative research that works toward social change and social justice goals (Lawless & Chen, 2019). TA contains an in-built quality procedure, such as a two-stage review process wherein the candidate themes are reviewed repeatedly against the coded data and the entire data set (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Once the texts have been explored for relevant themes, the quest for meaningful

understanding moves to an exploration of the relationship between and among various themes (O’Leary, 2004).

Braun and Clarke (2006) articulated a six-step framework for TA: (a) familiarizing yourself with the data (i.e., reading and re-reading the documents and noting initial ideas); (b) generating initial codes (i.e., coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each code); (c) searching for themes and subthemes (i.e., collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme); (d) reviewing themes (i.e., checking if the themes work with the coded data and the entire data set and generating a thematic map of the analysis); (e) defining and naming themes (i.e., ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells and generating clear definitions and names for each theme); and (f) producing the report (i.e., the final opportunity for analysis and producing a scholarly report of the inquiry). This roadmap guided my data analysis.

To apply TA, I immersed myself in the data until I was thoroughly familiar with the content. I started by taking notes or marking ideas I could code around, which began during the data-gathering process. My approach to coding was driven by preliminary questions that I prepared during the data collection for this study (listed in the Data Collection section of this chapter). Codes represent themes I saw emerging from the data set. I coded data by writing notes using different colored pens to indicate potential themes or patterns. Then, I analyzed how different codes combined to form an overarching theme. Some initial codes moved on to form main themes, whereas others moved on to form sub-themes. For refining the themes, I read all the coded extracts of data for each theme to make sure they formed a coherent pattern. If the theme did not appear to form a coherent

pattern, I considered whether the theme was problematic or whether the data extracts within the theme did not fit there. To resolve this issue, I created a new theme for those extracts that did not fit into the already-existing themes or discarded them from my analysis. I also coded any additional data within themes missed in the earlier coding process. Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that “the need for re-coding from the data set is to be expected as coding is an ongoing organic process” (p. 91). I defined and named themes to fit the overall story that I was telling about my data concerning the research question, ensuring minimal overlap between these themes.

After providing a thorough description of TA, in the following section, I provide a detailed description of CDA as a research methodology and how I employed it to analyze the data for this research study.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a research methodology for studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context. According to van Dijk (2015), CDA is analytical research that focuses on how text and talk in socio-political contexts are used to enact, reproduce, legitimize, and resist social power, abuse, and inequity. He describes CDA as a social movement in which critical discourse analysts take an explicit position on emerging discourses with the goal of understanding, exposing, and confronting social inequities. In other words, CDA aims to uncover ideology and power in discourse by understanding the relationship between textual features and larger social practices (Mogashoa, 2014). It explores how conversations and language perpetuate social and political inequalities through different strategies, tactics, and structures. In essence, CDA investigates how societal power relations are established and reinforced through language.

It seeks to analyze the meaning that lies beyond the grammatical structure, including the social and political context of language use. In simple terms, CDA exposes those ideologies that contain implicit and explicit messages embedded in discourses that perpetuate the marginalization and domination of certain groups of people (Fairclough, 1995; Paltridge, 2013). My inquiry into the AEP curriculum employs CDA to assess the interrelationship of ideology, gender, and power. For this, I engage in a close examination of the language, taken-for-granted assumptions, and power dynamics embedded in the AEP curriculum and, in turn, circulating in schools in India.

Michel Foucault's (1972, 1977, 1979) works have been crucial to the development of a range of different theories, which have been broadly grouped under the term 'discourse theory'. Discourse refers to the language used in community interactions, including formal and informal spoken and written communication (Nennig et al., 2023; Parker, 1990). Sara Mills (2004) explains that "discourses are sets of sanctioned statements that have some institutionalized force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think" (p. 55). In Foucault's (1979) view, discourses are never neutral but rather deployed in a tactical and strategic manner as mechanisms of social power. Therefore, Foucault (1972) claims that a thorough analysis of discourse is necessary to unearth those socio-cultural mechanisms that support what is allowed to be said and to keep it in place.

Discourses interact with and affect one another through intertextuality and, therefore, should not be considered in isolation (Hodges, 2015). For van Dijk (2015), CDA is not interested in just describing discourse structures; it tries to explain them through a careful examination of social interaction. He further argues that discourses are very much

like icebergs, with only a minor part of their meaning visible while a major part remains implicit (2012).

Dominant discourses are so powerful that they can obstruct competing discourses. As a qualitative analytical approach, CDA rests on the notion that the way we use language is purposeful, regardless of whether discursive choices are conscious or unconscious (Mullet, 2018). CDA is interested in language and power because it is usually in language that discriminatory practices are enacted, unequal relations of power are constituted and reproduced, and social asymmetries may be challenged and transformed (Blackledge, 2012).

Deconstructing and dismantling the ideologies entrenched in discourses that lead to the discrimination, marginalization, and control of certain groups is the primary work of CDA. For example, van Dijk (1991) examines racist discourses against immigrants that operate in the British press, particularly with the use of the pronouns 'we', 'us', and 'them'. Newspapers in Britain were shown to participate in and propagate a discourse of a dominating, white, overwhelming middle-class Britain. This sort of marginalization and control becomes so ingrained over time that it seems natural to the dominated groups and further takes the shape of what Gramsci called 'hegemony' (van Dijk, 2001) - a situation of ideological domination.

Taking the above ideas together, in this study I employ CDA to uncover ways of understanding gender and sexuality influenced by discourses, in particular, in the Indian socio-cultural context. When certain discursive understandings become sanctioned by power structures, individuals experience disciplining effects (Foucault, 1977). For my

inquiry, I explore how the body and sexuality become the targets of power and the locus of social control in the AEP curriculum (Jose et al., 2023).

My work follows important feminist scholarship that has used CDA to explore the intersection of gender, sexuality, and power. Feminist work on discourse has significantly influenced the field of CDA, particularly in the areas of social inequality and domination, leading to the development of feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005). Taking gender as a constructed discourse, Nartey (2021) says that patriarchal gender norms and prejudices result in the emergence of gender ideologies. This gives rise to the concepts of subordination, suppression, repression, and marginalization of women and LGBTQ+ communities. Robinson (2005) notes that gendered discourses maintain heterosexuality and traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. From this frame, CDA can interrogate “the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements” (Lazar, 2007, p. 141). It centers on how discourses of suppression and repression, commodification/objectification, sexism, patriarchy, and gendered stereotypes reinforce discourses that maintain gendered power dynamics (Nartey, 2021). Gender hegemony functions to marginalize and oppress those who do not benefit from it, generally privileging heterosexual males. It is a system of domination and oppression in society that enables heteropatriarchy to reign, often without question.

My inquiry employs CDA to explore heteronormative discourses that legitimize and reinforce discrimination against women and sexual and gender minorities. Heteronormative discourses excuse and support homophobia and transphobia – the irrational fear of queer people - and heterosexism – discrimination against sexual minorities (Robinson, 2016). Discourses that function to officially negate sexuality outside the confines of heterosexual

marriage have the potency to perpetuate and sustain gender-based violence against LGBTQ+ communities (Jones, 2011). Often, such discourses lead to the subtle acceptance of gender-based violence against these communities (Robinson, 2005; Luhmann, 1998; Meyer, 2007). Through discursive utterances and taken-for-granted language and assumptions, CDA focuses on the results or consequences of power abuse by dominant groups and institutions that are indicative of power dynamics (van Dijk, 1991).

CDA enables the identification of systemic power structures and ideologies that may undermine social justice. In one scholarly example, Peng et al. (2022) adopted a CDA approach to analyze the Chinese male gaze upon sportswomen. The study elucidates the discursive practices that male Chinese fans adopt to sexualize women and trivialize their accomplishments. The male gaze upon sportswomen is not limited to the sporting context but serves as an epitome of patriarchal social norms being entrenched in wider Chinese society. In another study, Trinh and Sachs (2023) used CDA to critique the representation of queer terms, images, and dialogues in Vietnamese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks. The intentional refusal to bring the representation of queerness in textbooks reiterates the problem of the reproduction of heteronormativity in the Vietnamese societal structure. In yet another example, employing a CDA approach, Nanditha (2022) focused on textual descriptions and interpretations of how the #MeTooIndia campaign demonstrates the non-inclusivity of marginalized and gendered bodies and narratives on Twitter in a highly heteropatriarchal Indian society. I draw inspiration from their approach to expose dominant discourses on gender and sexuality that permeate the AEP curriculum.

Despite the advantages it offers, CDA has not been immune to criticism. Wodak (1999) asserts that the subjective viewpoints of CDA analysts may influence the analysis to

enable critical examination of societal issues or viewpoints within the discourse. As a result, during the analysis, CDA analysts may shape and give meaning to the production of discourse by basing it on their preconceptions and personal beliefs (Wooffitt, 2005). Another critique leveled is that CDA analysts tend to select texts that are more likely to yield results meeting their own preconceptions (Sharrock & Anderson, 1981; Schegloff, 1997; Wetherell, 1998; Billig & Schegloff, 1999; Verschueren, 2001). Also, CDA is mainly conducted using qualitative research methods (Barker & Galasinski, 2001) and small samples of texts (Fairclough, 1992) to explore the discourse within social, political, and historical contexts. Schegloff (1997) accuses CDA of projecting a context presupposed by the analysts onto the discourse created by the participants, which means that CDA analysts impose their own interests on the analysis rather than the participants' interest in the discourse. Regardless of these weaknesses, Stubbs (1997) believes that CDA does help in foregrounding important societal issues. No discourse is neutral, and no analysis is neutral. I plan to bring reflexivity into my work to understand how power is operating through my own analyses. The only thing one can do when doing CDA is to be honest about one's positioning in relation to the discourse. In sum, CDA makes significant contributions to understanding our society, how social phenomena are interconnected, and how structures of power and ideologies work behind discourses (Hidalgo Tenorio, 2011).

CDA is a valuable tool for research in the field of education, given that curricula can be understood as discursive practices and that they “can be examined as discourse-related problems” (Thomas, 2005, p. 26). CDA is particularly appropriate for curricula document analysis because “it allows a detailed investigation of the relationship of language to other social processes, and of how language works within power relations”

(Taylor, 2004, p. 436). Drawing on literature and examples of CDA, I position gender and sexuality at the center of my analysis of the AEP curriculum. This approach enables me to examine both discursive practices and educational processes that perpetuate gender and sexuality inequities. Language is powerful, and if I want to understand power dynamics and structures in society, I must look to language for answers. CDA as an approach emphasizes language as a social practice and helps to explore the mostly hidden, ideological, and political effects of language use (Fairclough, 1995).

Given that CDA aims to expose dominant ideologies embedded in discourse, I employed CDA to analyze how text is phrased in the AEP curriculum and how these textual features intersect with the complexity of gender and power relations in Indian society (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Take, for example, the following text from the AEP curriculum: “Why are you wasting your father’s money...?” (NCERT, 2020, p. 167). The phrase ‘father’s money’ is indicative of a highly patriarchal society. Instead of using phrases such as ‘mother’s money’, ‘parents’ money’, or ‘family’s money’, this particular phrase brought attention to a discourse in which education for boys is prioritized. This results in academic advancements and professional achievements for boys, which is not the case for girls. While the future life trajectory for boys is good careers, girls are expected to prioritize the care and well-being of their families over their careers.

Through the application of CDA, power becomes apparent in how the text of the sexuality education curriculum advocates for the domestication of women as housewives and caregivers. Such curricular practices reinforce the existing norms about the qualities of a good Indian wife. In sum, beyond my thematic document analysis, I lean toward CDA as it attempts to uncover discourses that reflect and maintain the prevailing power

asymmetries. In the next section, I discuss, in concrete terms, how I apply TA and CDA in my study by discussing how I collected and analyzed data.

Research Design: Data Collection

The goal of this study is to advance a nuanced understanding of gender norms and hierarchies in textual discourses within the national AEP curriculum in Indian schools. I employ CDA by analyzing contemporary government documents as the principal method of inquiry. I began by looking to government websites as the primary source of information. As a first step, I checked if any documents related to my research question were publicly accessible. All shortlisted documents were available in the English language, a legacy of British colonial education policies in India. These documents were shortlisted based on how well they contributed to answering the study's research question. For example, the *National Education Policy (2020)* provides information on the Indian government's approach to inclusive and equitable education, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), including female and transgender individuals, which is critical to achieving an inclusive and equitable society. The *Training and Resource Material: Health and Wellness of School-Going Children* (i.e., the AEP curriculum) functions as the primary document for this study (NCERT, 2020). This document is intended for teachers and teacher educators from the upper primary to the senior secondary stages. The development of this curriculum and training material was undertaken under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as a part of Ayushman Bharat, a flagship programme of the Government of India. It provides comprehensive knowledge, psychological support, and services to school-going children related to health and well-being.

After analyzing the primary document, I examine the remaining four shortlisted documents that provide India's broader social context concerning education. I analyze the *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff* (NCERT, 2023a) Draft Document. This module has been developed with consultations from educationists, key functionaries of school education, national-level apex organizations like the National Council of Transgender Persons (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment), the National Commission for Protection of Child's Rights, and the National Human Rights Commission, as well as transgender people, to bring about an effective impact in the system. Then, I look to the *National Education Policy* (Government of India, 2020). I also examine the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCERT, 2005), which is woven into different thematic areas of the primary document (i.e., the AEP curriculum). Lastly, I analyze the *National Curriculum Framework for School Education* (NCERT, 2023b). This document forms one of the key components of the *National Education Policy* (2020) intended to realize the highest quality education for all children, consistent with realizing an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by the Constitution of India. Owing to the public availability of these five documents, ethics approval is not required for this study.

For the process of data gathering from these documents, I prepared a list of all the topics and questions that I wanted to ask of the documents during the analysis stages. Once I had the list prepared, I shortlisted only those topics and questions that helped address my research question for this study: How is the national curriculum of the AEP in India influenced by dominant discourses of gender and sexuality? I asked open-ended questions with the potential for follow-up questions. The following are preliminary examples of

shortlisted questions that guided this work: (a) what areas or topics are covered under ‘Gender Equality’ in the curriculum?; (b) what areas or topics could be covered, but are noticeably absent?; (c) what areas or topics would be considered helpful but are not included?; (d) can the curriculum be considered inclusive in terms of representing gender identities beyond the normative?; (e) where does the curriculum provide an opportunity for critical feminist pedagogies to be included and what do these look like?; (f) where does the curriculum provide an opportunity for critical queer pedagogies to be included and what do these look like?

I asked additional questions to determine which strategies could be used to deconstruct and dismantle gender norms and hierarchies in the curriculum, such as (a) what content and themes lack clarity; (b) how does this curriculum address the issue of gender-based violence against girls and women which remains pervasive in the country?; (c) does this curriculum perpetuate gender norms or stereotypes in its teaching materials?; (d) how does the curriculum prepare young people to recognize and stop sexual harassment, abuse, and violence against girls and women?; (e) does this curriculum in any way perpetuate the ideas of the dominant group(s) e.g., heterosexual men?; (f) to what extent does the curriculum attempt to justify or normalize gender hierarchies and oppression?; (g) to what extent does the curriculum provide opportunities for young people to analyze power dynamics in their relationships in school, family, community, or the wider society and discuss strategies to resist any form of social inequality?; (h) does the curriculum prepare and motivate young women and men to engage in social justice and social change work inside and outside school premises?; (i) do transgender individuals share equal space in the curriculum alongside heterosexual people since they have a legal status now?; and (j) can

the current representation of transgender people in the curriculum work toward disrupting the stigma, oppression, and marginalization of these communities? These preliminary questions guided my data analysis of the official documents. In the following section, I discuss how TA and CDA collaborated in the analytical steps of open and closed coding to critically analyze the selected contemporary government documents.

Research Design: Data Analysis

When TA and CDA collaborate, the understanding of “power as embedded in texts as a way to reproduce understandings of social positioning and reinforce hegemonic understandings of culture” comes into clearer focus (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 94). I analyze the documents selected for this study to examine not only what is present but also what is absent or implied. Guided by a critical analysis of repetition and recurrence within the AEP curriculum discourses as they relate to gender hierarchies and power dynamics in Indian society, I describe my analytical process of moving from open coding to closed coding.

Step 1: Open Coding – During the initial stages of coding, I read and reread through the primary document and the four supporting documents several times to look for repetitions and recurrences. Repetition refers to the specific reappearance of keywords or phrases, while recurrence refers to an idea or meaning that is repeated, not necessarily using the same words (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2006) claim that analysis entails continuously moving back and forth between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data, and the analysis of the data. They suggest using visual aids such as tables, mind-maps, or writing the name of each code with a short description on separate pieces of paper to assist in categorizing the different codes into themes. Guided by repetition and recurrence, at this

stage, I focus on what the discourses reveal, indicate, or identify as discursive patterns or themes that are important, salient, or meaningful. For instance, examples in the AEP curriculum on restrictions imposed on young girls/women or a tokenistic approach toward the inclusion of transgender people lead me to identify the emerging theme of gender discrimination or gender roles or stereotypes.

Step 2: Closed Coding – Once I understand the repeated and recurring patterns of information embedded in the discourses, I begin interlinking these discourses with larger societal ideologies in the next phase of closed coding. In this second step, I ask questions about what the emerging theme might be doing or how it is functioning. In addition to considering what these discourses reveal, I also consider what these discourses might be concealing and/or what might be absent in them. CDA helps analyze language for opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control (Wodak, 2002 as cited in Oughton, 2007). I pay special attention to the repetition and recurrence in thinking about interrelationships between discourses and dominant ideologies. For instance, building on the earlier discovery of the theme of gender discrimination or gender roles or stereotypes, I move on to build the theme around relevant gender ideologies, such as patriarchy, heteropatriarchy, heteronormativity, or sexism.

I used TA to find themes or discursive patterns in the documents. To begin the coding process, I read the documents thoroughly and then looked at the preliminary questions carefully. Following the key ideas contained in these questions, I wrote codes or texts from the documents on separate pieces of paper. I then placed similar codes based on repetition or recurrence in a common potential theme pile. For instance, I placed codes or texts like “Simi, 14 years old, is not allowed to go out alone”, “Reena, what’s the time? I

have told you hundreds of times to be back before dark?”, and “Tara needs to be sensitized” in one theme pile. I placed another set of codes: “[Simi’s] twin brother can go there alone”, “[Reena’s] Dad said, Don’t compare yourself to him. He is a boy!”, and “One day, this group [of boys] decides to visit a sex worker” in another potential theme pile. To refine the two potential theme piles, I read all coded texts to make sure they formed a coherent pattern. As both these piles of codes pointed toward a common potential theme around restrictions based on gender, I labeled the emerging theme ‘gender-based restrictions’. To improve the organization of my emerging theme, I divided this theme into two categories, namely ‘restrictions on mobility’ and ‘restrictions on sexuality’. I repeated this process for all coded data by labeling and naming emergent themes.

Once I labeled all emergent themes, I conducted CDA to analyze how these texts (written on pieces of paper earlier as codes) were phrased and their connection to the intricate nature of gender and power dynamics in Indian society. My analysis of the examples mentioned above indicated a highly patriarchal society. They brought my attention to a discourse that grants families and communities the right to control and dictate the lives of girls and women regarding their mobility, expressions, relationships, and desires while simultaneously granting unrestricted freedom to boys and men. My analysis also revealed that such discursive practices validate the moral policing of girls in Indian society that promotes a victim blaming mentality. I repeated this process for all emergent themes to uncover discourses of gender and sexuality in the selected documents.

In the above two thematic analytical steps of open and closed coding, it is crucial to return to the raw data using a systematic critical discourse analytic lens to examine and critique textual statements. This relates to how ideologies, power, gender, and social

structures influence the AEP curriculum taught in schools in India. To recognize biases and understand their impact on my analysis, the patterns or themes and subthemes are checked repeatedly for the existence of premature commitment to preconceived ideas, notions, and perspectives.

In this chapter, I discussed the methodological tools I bring to critically examine the AEP curriculum. I provided an overview of thematic document analysis and CDA, described my data collection methods, as well as the analytical steps I employed to identify, analyze, examine, and interpret themes. In the following chapter, I report the findings of my analysis of each of the five contemporary government documents. By using examples from each of these documents, I discuss discursive patterns that I identified in my analysis to support my claims.

Chapter Five: Findings

In this chapter, I engage in thematic document analysis and critical discourse analysis of the five official documents published by the Government of India that support or resist gendered power dynamics in the Indian educational context. I begin by presenting the findings of the primary AEP document that reveal discursive patterns pertaining to patriarchal gender ideology and heteronormativity. Next, I present my analysis of the four supporting documents that reveal discursive patterns related to the awareness, knowledge, and understanding of sexual and gender identities. For each claim I make in my analysis, I provide relevant examples from the documents, or implied discourses beneath the surface, to support those claims. All examples have been presented verbatim and, therefore, may contain some minor grammatical errors. The meaning of these examples remains unaffected by these minor errors.

The AEP Curriculum: Training and Resource Material

In this section, I explore the *Training and Resource Material: Health and Wellness of School-Going Children* (i.e., the AEP curriculum), which functioned as the primary document for this study (NCERT, 2020). My analysis of this document exposes how the discursive practices of the AEP reproduce dominant discourses of gender and sexuality that create and sustain an inequitable society. To analyze these discursive practices, I have used thematic analysis to categorize them into five discursive patterns: ‘gender-based restrictions’; ‘binary norms of femininity and masculinity’; ‘gender-prescribed familial roles’; ‘heteronormativity and cisnormativity’; and ‘who or what gets left out’. Below, I present my critical discourse analysis of these themes in detail.

Theme 1: Gender-Based Restrictions

The prevailing misogynistic and conservative patriarchal ideology entrenched in Indian society grants families and communities the right to control and dictate the daily lives of girls and women in terms of their mobility, expressions, relationships, and desires, placing them in a subordinate and disempowered position (Bhallamudi, 2022; Hebert et al., 2020; McCammon et al., 2022; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Narrain, 2004; Nieder et al., 2019). The theme explores the extent to which the curriculum normalizes or justifies gender hierarchies and oppression. Below are some examples that demonstrate how the curriculum supports the authority that families and communities hold over girls and women. Although the curriculum recognizes the need “to challenge gender-based discrimination” and uphold “equality in all interactions”, gender disparities are apparent (NCERT, 2020, p. 73). I have divided this theme into two categories: ‘restrictions on mobility’ and ‘restrictions on sexuality’.

Restrictions on Mobility

The curriculum engages in discourses that validate that the mobility of girls outside the home needs to be policed and closely monitored (McCammon et al., 2022). For instance, in Module 5, Activity 5.4 *Gender Power Walk*, the following text appears: “Simi, 14 years old, is not allowed to go out alone to the nearby market, while her twin brother can go there alone” (NCERT, 2020, p. 82). This example shows mobility restrictions being imposed on a young girl, while her twin brother enjoys the freedom to go out unaccompanied. Looking further in the text reveals that the “take-home messages” that follow do not explicitly address the role of gender in shaping the imposition of specific restrictions on girls and women (p. 82). In India, girls and women are usually discouraged

from going out of the house, especially after dark, on the pretext that public spaces are dangerous for them, and therefore, they need to be protected (Nieder et al., 2019). Another discursive example in Module 3, Activity 3.1 *Understanding Other's Emotions*, Situation 1 depicts a father reprimanding his daughter for coming home late in the evening. He does so while justifying that her brother does not need to be reprimanded for the same:

Reena and Pintu came home late, after playing. As they entered the house, dad said, "Reena, what's the time? I have told you hundreds of times to be back before dark?" Reena said, "You always scold me and never say anything to Pintu." Dad said, "Don't compare yourself to him. He is a boy!"

(p. 40)

The "reflective questions" and "take-home messages" in this activity focus on fostering empathy and strengthening relationships and do not address why such restrictions are imposed solely on the girl (pp. 42 - 43). In the same module, Activity 3.3 *Dealing with Unhealthy Relationships*, Case Study 1 introduces a scenario where "Laali's maternal uncle comes to stay at her home from time to time. He places a lot of restrictions on Laali. When he arrives, Laali is unable to meet her friends or go out of the house" (p. 46). This example highlights a young girl experiencing restrictions imposed on her by a male family member. While the activity encourages learners to explore ways to "communicate their feelings clearly, without hurting the other person", it does not examine the enforcement of these restrictions on girls and women (p. 46).

While these discourses show the imposition of mobility restrictions on girls in familial settings to keep them safe, they also reflect the dominance of men over women in Indian society (Deosthali et al., 2022; Jain, 2020; Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023; Moraes &

Sahasranaman, 2018; Roy, 2018). Similar discourses of women wielding such power over men are absent. The prevailing dominant patriarchal ideology that restricts the mobility of girls and women hinders their opportunities and advancements in terms of educational, professional, and other pursuits.

Restrictions on Sexuality

The curriculum engages in discourses that affirm discourses that inequitably place restrictions on women's sexuality (Bhallamudi, 2022; Hebert et al., 2020). For instance, Module 1, Activity 1.6 *Skills to Counter Stigmas and Stereotypes during Adolescence*, Situation 1 includes the following text: "Yesterday, a girl in her class jokingly asked Sara if she was having 'dirty thoughts', which led to rash. The next day, Sara does not come to the school" (NCERT, 2020, p. 20). Here we see that thoughts of a sexual nature are depicted as shameful and embarrassing in the context of girls. A similar message is conveyed in Module 11, Activity 11.5 *Online Safety: My Responsibility*. Situation 8 introduces a scenario where "Tara sees an inappropriate film clip on Wendy's mobile. Wendy informs that the mobile shop in the village has many more and uploads on mobile for a small amount of money. Tara is tempted" (p. 205). In the "discussion questions" that follow, it is stated that "a lot of content is available online and all of it might not be age appropriate. Tara needs to be sensitized that online media can be used for many useful things rather than watching inappropriate content" (pp. 205-206). Such discourses legitimize the idea of moral policing of girls and women by repressing their sexual desires and expression.

In contrast to the above, discourses promoting the need to control men's sexuality are absent. For instance, in Module 10, Activity 10.4 *Seeking Help to Keep Safe*, the following text appears in Case Study 3: "Vimmi is in Class VI...Tikli has an elder brother,

Dukku. One day when Vimmi went to Tikli’s house, Dukku took her to a room alone and showed her some obscene pictures of adults without clothes” (p. 179). In this example, a discourse that Dukku should not access such content and that he needs to be ‘sensitized’, as was in the case with Tara, is missing. In addition, in Module 9, Activity 9.3 *Vulnerability of Women and Adolescents to HIV*, Case Study 2 depicts a 15-year-old boy ‘visiting’ a sex worker:

Fifteen-year-old Ravi is troubled by his parents’ arguments at home...As a result, he stays out of the house for long hours. He hangs out with a group of older boys...One day, this group decides to visit a sex worker. Ravi is uncomfortable but not able to think for himself, Ravi decides to go along with them. (p. 154)

While the preceding “points for discussion” are in the context of HIV, such as “What made Ravi go along with the older boys”, “Will Ravi’s behaviour solve his problems? Please give reasons for your response”, “What are the possible risks for Ravi in this case, especially in the context of HIV?”, and “What advice would you give Ravi as a friend?”, they do not mention Ravi’s age or that he needs to be ‘sensitized’, unlike Tara (p. 154). Also, questions like “What are the possible risks for Ravi in this case, especially in the context of HIV?” pejoratively frame sex workers while attempting to influence students to think negatively about them (p. 154). Such discourses represent patriarchal control over women’s sexuality while granting men unrestricted sexual freedom, exposing a double standard in sexual morality (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018).

Despite its stated desire to challenge and disrupt gender-based discrimination in the Indian patriarchal societal structure, the curriculum also supports a discourse of moral

policing of women by families and communities (NCERT, 2020). Such discourses gave rise to feminist movements in the country, such as the Pink Chaddi Campaign, Pinjra Tod, and the Nirbhaya Movement (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Srivastava, 2019; Upadhyay, 2015). Discursive practices, such as these, not only place women in a subordinate and disempowered position but also promote a victim blaming mentality that oppresses them (Lange & Young, 2019; Nieder et al., 2019).

Theme 2: Binary Norms of Femininity and Masculinity

Owing to socio-cultural factors, many women and men in India internalize deep-rooted gender norms that influence their behavior in familial and social settings.⁴ While women are encouraged to internalize gender norms of submission and subservience, men internalize those of domination and control (Nieder et al., 2019). In attempting to subvert prevailing gender norms of femininity and masculinity in Indian society, the AEP curriculum (NCERT, 2020) asserts that:

in many cultures, as boys grow up, they are expected to conform to the norms of ‘masculinity’, which require them to be aggressive, and even violent. Girls are expected to conform to the norms of ‘femininity’, which often require them to be soft, shy and adjusting. These stereotypes should change and new norms of masculinity and femininity encouraged, which

⁴ It is important to note the presence of gender nonconforming or genderqueer who do not conform to social expectations of binary gender identity and gender expression and who might challenge social expectations of masculine and feminine behavior and appearance.

allow boys and men to be sensitive, emotional, and caring while allowing women to be assertive, strong and self-confident. (p. 87)

The theme explores whether the curriculum perpetuates prevailing gender norms or stereotypes in its teaching materials. Below are some examples that demonstrate how the curriculum conforms to the traditional norms of femininity and masculinity despite acknowledging the need to promote “new norms of masculinity and femininity” (p. 87). I have divided this theme into two categories: ‘norms of femininity’ and ‘norms of masculinity’.

Norms of Femininity

Even after invoking ‘new norms of femininity’ that encourage women to be “assertive, strong and self-confident”, discourses of women as “soft, shy and adjusting” are apparent (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; NCERT, 2020, p. 87). For instance, Module 1, Activity 1.3 *Attaining Puberty*, includes the following text: “It is important to work on your own inhibition in talking about reproductive health or else girls will not open up during the activity” (NCERT, 2020, p. 8). This activity is recommended to be taught separately to girls and boys, with female and male teachers instructing each group, respectively. The statement assumes that female teachers and students are more likely to be inhibited or reluctant to talk openly about reproductive health, suggesting that they need special encouragement to ‘open up’ during discussions. This reinforces the traditional norm that girls and women are expected to be modest, reserved, or private, particularly when it comes to discussing their bodies, sexuality, or reproductive health. Interestingly, similar discourses of discomfort or inhibition are not acknowledged in the context of male teachers and students. Further, in Module 10, Activity 10.5 *Violence, Injury and Seeking Help*, Case

Study 2 depicts a mother and her daughter being abused by both the husband and the boyfriend:

Dimpy's boyfriend cares a lot for her but he often looks down upon her. He says "Don't be stupid". Once, over an argument, he hit her on her face but later apologised for the mistake and told her that he loved her. She has also seen her father hitting her mother occasionally. (p. 183)

While the follow-up questions, such as "Do you recognize any kind of abuse or violence?" and "What can be the possible solutions" are designed to prompt recognition of abuse and reflection on possible solutions, they fail to challenge traditional norms of femininity that promote the idea that women should be passive, forgiving, and enduring in the face of emotional and physical abuse, especially in intimate relationships (p. 184). Another example in the same activity, *Case Study Example* shows a girl unable to disclose the abuse she is experiencing to either of her parents:

Annu is in Class X. Her uncle touches her inappropriately when nobody is around. This has been happening for more than a year. She is unable to tell her father because she feels he will not believe her. Even if she tells her mother, she feels her mother will not be able to support her. (p. 181)

This discursive example validates traditional gender norms that depict women as powerless or lacking the agency to challenge male-dominated family structures. These examples consistently indicate that the curriculum discourses make it hard to break free from the traditional notions of femininity, even if that is its desired goal (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018). Furthermore, in Module 10, Activity 10.1 *What is Violence?*, Story 3 includes the following example: "One day, by mistake, his wife adds extra salt in the dinner. Overcome

by anger, Shyam slaps his wife” (p. 167). Although the preceding “points for discussion” focus on violence, with questions like “How could Shyam have behaved differently in this situation?” and “Do you think violence is justified in relationships where the perpetrator claims to love the other person? Why/why not?”, they overlook the influence of Indian society’s conventional standards of femininity, which often involve the expectation for women to accept abuse within marital relationships. Another example in the same activity, Story 2 depicts a young girl as incapable of standing up for herself when it illustrates, “A girl is walking in the local market. A group of boys see her and start passing remarks and humming a film song. The girl turns back and looks in their direction and walks away quietly” (p. 166). These discourses not only negate ‘new norms of femininity’ that the curriculum wants to promote but also perpetuate existing culturally accepted expectations of what an ideal woman should or should not be as contextualized within Indian society (Roy, 2018). This echoes a discourse of moral policing of girls and women by families and communities observed in the earlier theme of gender-based restrictions. Such discourses contribute to the problem of sexual and other forms of violence against girls and women, posing a significant threat to their well-being (Maity, 2022; Mondal & Paul, 2023).

Norms of Masculinity

Even if the curriculum emphasizes the need to promote ‘new norms of masculinity’ that encourage men to be “sensitive, emotional and caring”, discourses of men as “aggressive, and even violent” are evident (McCammon et al., 2022; NCERT, 2020, p. 87). For instance, Module 3, Activity 3.3 *Dealing with Unhealthy Relationships*, Case Study 3 introduces a scenario where “When Iqbal joined the school hostel, a group of senior boys started bullying him. Soon this became a routine and they started threatening Iqbal of bad

consequences if he did not do their work” (NCERT, 2020, p. 46). This discursive example reinforces traditional norms of masculinity by perpetuating a common stereotype that boys are more likely to engage in aggressive, dominant behavior. The framing of the “reflective question” as “how can we deal effectively with unhealthy relationships” misrepresents the scenario as a communication issue, failing to recognize that the core problem is one of power dynamics, not merely miscommunication (p. 47). This perpetuates the harmful notion that boys will naturally engage in this type of hierarchical behavior. Module 10, Activity 10.1 *What is Violence?*, Story 5 also shows a group of boys bullying other boys:

For the past two months, some senior boys from their school have been making them carry their heavy bags from home to school and back. When Rizwan and Gaurav try to speak up, the senior boys use abusive language, push and kick, and tell them to learn to be ‘men’. (p. 167)

By using language such as ‘learn to be men’, this activity perpetuates the stereotype that masculinity is linked to physical strength, power, and aggression. The behavior reflects a societal norm that equates manhood with the capacity for dominance, particularly through violent or forceful means. By depicting boys as bullies, the story suggests the idea that being a ‘real man’ involves both asserting dominance and accepting aggression as part of male socialization. The follow-up questions such as “Is this violence? Why do you think so?”, “How would Gaurav and Rizwan be feeling in such a situation?”, and “What can Gaurav and Rizwan do to stop this?” focus on what the victims can do, ignoring the importance of systemic responsibility, where the bullies should be held responsible for their behavior. This reflects a broader societal tendency to allow boys to engage in harmful behaviors without facing serious consequences, often excused under the ‘boys will be boys’

mentality. In another example, Module 10, Activity 10.5 *Violence, Injury and Seeking Help*, Case Study 2 depicts a boyfriend and a husband as abusive and violent:

Dimpy's boyfriend cares a lot for her but he often looks down upon her. He says "Don't be stupid". Once, over an argument, he hit her on her face but later apologised for the mistake and told her that he loved her. She has also seen her father hitting her mother occasionally. (p. 183)

The "points for discussion" put forth questions like "Do you recognize any kind of abuse or violence?" and "Have we heard of any similar situations?" do not explicitly call attention to the gendered nature of the violence (p. 184). Such discourses ignore the structural issue of how societal expectations of masculinity and femininity shape power dynamics between men and women. Traditional norms of masculinity often grant men power in both public and private spheres, and this scenario reflects that dynamic. The question "What can be the possible solutions?" focuses on victim responses rather than addressing the need for societal and structural changes (p. 184). It does not critically engage with how patriarchal norms encourage male violence in intimate relationships, which limits the effectiveness of the discussion in challenging the traditional norms that underpin such violence. This is yet another example of the curriculum discourses finding it hard to escape the conventional standards of masculinity prevalent in the Indian societal structure. Furthermore, in Module 10, Activity 10.4 *Seeking Help to Keep Safe*, Case Study 2 depicts a male teacher who uses violence to maintain discipline reinforcing the idea that the use of physical violence, particularly by men, is a demonstration of strength, control, and the enforcement of order:

The teacher slapped Nima and dragged him to the front of the class, pulling his ear. The teacher turned towards the class and shouted, "I will not tolerate

any indiscipline in my class.” He then caned the boy on his legs before the class and asked him to leave the classroom. (p. 178)

The “points for discussion” such as “Do you see any abuse and violence in this case? Why/Why not?”, “Have we heard of any similar situations?”, “What are the possible solutions? Who can help? What can Nima do himself? Who can he seek help from?”, and “What are some of the laws and rights that can help children when they are experiencing physical and emotional violence?” primarily focus on identifying violence and the laws that protect them from it. They do not critically engage students to think about how boys and men are socialized to accept violence as a form of discipline or to use violence to assert their authority, overlooking the role of gender in shaping behavior. Such discourses reflect normative behavioral ideals for men as contextualized within Indian society, also reflected in the earlier theme on gender-based restrictions (Dhanaraj & Mahambre, 2022; Lathabhavan et al., 2023, McCammon et al., 2022; Nieder et al., 2019).

Taken together, the AEP curriculum exposes hierarchical constructions of femininity and masculinity that show several types of violence perpetrated by men against women and by men against other men (Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; NCERT, 2020; Nieder et al., 2019). Discourses, such as these, put women at risk by legitimizing gender-based violence by men and the subtle acceptance of such violence by women as a normal part of their everyday lives and relationships (Nieder et al., 2019). Such discursive practices result in significant physical and mental health issues for women (Lathabhavan et al., 2023; Mondal & Paul, 2023).

Theme 3: Gender-Prescribed Familial Roles

The patriarchal structure of Indian society considers women as better suited to caring for the family and men as breadwinners (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). This validates gender asymmetries in structure and role (Bhallamudi, 2022). This theme explores the extent to which the curriculum provides opportunities for young people to analyze power dynamics in their relationships in family, community, or wider society. Below are some examples that show how the curriculum supports gender-prescribed roles for women and men in familial settings (NCERT, 2020). I have divided this theme into two categories: ‘family-oriented role of women’ and ‘economic role of men’.

Family-Oriented Role of Women

Despite societal expectations of domestic responsibilities being reserved only for girls and women, the curriculum attempts to subvert traditional gender roles by including discourses of adolescent boys performing domestic chores (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; NCERT, 2020). An example in Module 5, Activity 5.5 *Dealing with Gender-based Discrimination*, Case Study 5, “Aslam and his sister help their parents in daily household chores like up-keep of the house and washing dishes” directly challenges traditional gender roles that associate domestic work with girls and women (NCERT, 2020, p. 85). Another discursive example in Module 10, Activity 10.1 *What is Violence?* reads like this: “Neighbours tease Rupesh because he helps with the household chores” (p. 169). These examples not only challenge the notion that domestic chores are inherently linked to gender but also point to the broader societal need to normalize gender-neutral roles in the home.

Some other discourses in the curriculum probe gender-prescribed roles for women and men. For instance, Module 5, Activity 5.2 *Gender Roles and Discrimination* includes the following question: “Why is it that women do much more housework than men?” (p.

77). This question examines the domestication of Indian women. When referring to men “cooking in dhabas/hotels/Master Chef programmes” and “washing/cleaning clothes in dry cleaning shops”, learners are asked, “Why don’t most men perform these tasks in their households?” (p. 77). These questions encourage a critical examination of societal norms, upbringing, and gendered expectations that lead to the unequal distribution of household work. The “reflective questions” in the activity further examine these gender roles by asking a series of questions, like “What household work do you think men should learn and perform? Why? How will equal participation of men in household works affect the lives of women?”, and “How will the equal participation of men and boys in household chores affect their own lives?” (pp. 77-78). These questions emphasize that the redistribution of household labor can reduce the disproportionate burden on women, allowing them more time for professional and educational pursuits. By framing equal participation as beneficial not only for women but also for men, these questions serve as a form of resistance against long-held views in Indian society, which regard men performing traditionally female-prescribed duties as unmasculine.

However, contrary to the above, other discourses in the curriculum mirror family-oriented role for women. For instance, Module 6, Activity 6.4 *Sanitation and Health* includes the text: “Hema does not have any help at home and finds it difficult to manage the children and her household work of cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and vessels” (p. 100). This exemplifies the unequal expectations placed on women to manage household work and childcare without adequate support. Module 10, Activity 10.1 *What is Violence?*, Story 3 includes: “One day, by mistake, his wife adds extra salt in the dinner” (p. 167). This example reflects the stereotypical division of labor where cooking and other

household chores are seen as a woman's domain. Further, Module 1, Activity 1.1 *I Am Changing*, Case Study 3 contains another example: "Rebati's mother often tells her not to talk for very long on the phone, to spend more time studying rather than watching TV" (p. 4). The curriculum reflects a common gendered assumption that women, particularly mothers, are responsible for their children's upbringing. Module 1, Activity 1.2 *Physical Changes during Adolescence*, Case 1 further reinforces the traditional gender role that places mothers as the primary caregivers and emotional support for children:

Mihir wonders what is wrong with him. He recalls that his mother still calls him 'my sweet boy'. He decides to go home and ask his mother why he is so different from Rakesh and whether something is wrong with him. (p. 6)

Module 8, Activity 8.1 *Healthy Life Choices Within Our Reach*, Case Study 3, "Zakir and Shama are siblings. After completing their homework, their mother asks them to relax for an hour" (p. 132) also depicts similar ideas. It portrays a mother responsible for managing her children's daily routines and well-being. Such discourses display gender disparities in opportunities and achievement, shaped by the ever-present patriarchal force that permeates the Indian socio-cultural environment (Landry et al., 2020). Discursive practices, such as the above, outline the future life trajectory for girls as mothers and housewives as prescribed by the culture (Dhanaraj & Mahambare, 2022).

Economic Role of Men

Discourses of men in their gender-prescribed role as the primary breadwinners for the family are palpable in the curriculum (Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023; NCERT, 2020). For instance, Module 10, Activity 10.1 *What is Violence?*, Story 3, includes the following example: "Shyam loves his wife a lot. He takes good care of her. Takes her out

for shopping and to parks and melas” (NCERT, 2020, p. 167). This use of language reinforces the role of a husband as financially responsible for his family. Story 4 in the same activity includes another discursive example: “Why are you wasting your father’s money and my time?” (p. 167). This also depicts the traditional expectation that men (fathers) are the primary financial providers for their families. Further, Module 6, Activity 6.4 *Sanitation and Health*, has the following text: “Hema is a mother of three young children who are 8, 4 and 2 years old, respectively. Her husband is a daily wage labourer who goes to work early in the morning” (p. 100). This example also reflects the traditional view of men as breadwinners. Another text in Module 11, Activity 11.5 *Online Safety: My Responsibility*, Situation 3 “Lalit has been chatting with Priya over phone for several months... Lalit wants to meet Priya and take her out for shopping” serves as an example (p. 204). This discursive example implicitly reinforces traditional gender roles that position men as financial providers in romantic contexts. Such expectations perpetuate a societal framework in which men are conditioned to assume the role of the breadwinner. Although the above discourses show that men are expected to be the primary breadwinners for the family, an absence of similar discourses for women suggests that Indian women are expected to prioritize the care and well-being of their families over their careers (Dhanaraj & Mahambare, 2022; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023).

Despite its efforts to challenge and question societal expectations of gender-prescribed familial roles in the Indian societal structure, the curriculum also supports a discourse that both women and men should adhere to their traditional gender roles, also reflected in the earlier themes (Landry et al., 2020; NCERT, 2020). By imposing a culturally bound future life trajectory that requires girls to marry, become housewives, and

take care of the home and children while their husbands provide for them, such discursive practices disempower girls (Bhallamudi, 2022; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). Practices such as these further disadvantage girls, as a life confined to the domestic sphere dictates that they do not require much education for their future responsibilities as wives and mothers (Landry et al., 2020; McCammon et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

In India, the socio-cultural environment is still predominantly heteropatriarchal, with unfavorable attitudes toward sexual and gender identities (Pufahl et al., 2021). This theme explores some of the preliminary questions, such as whether this curriculum perpetuates the ideas of dominant groups or normalizes gender hierarchies and oppression. It also examines if transgender individuals are given equal representation in the curriculum alongside heterosexual people, owing to their legal status, and whether their current representation disrupts the stigma, oppression, and marginalization they face. Additionally, this theme analyzes whether the curriculum can be considered inclusive in terms of representing gender identities beyond the normative. Below are some examples that indicate how the curriculum promotes sexualities and gender identities deemed desirable in the Indian socio-cultural environment (NCERT, 2020). For this purpose, I have divided this theme into two categories: ‘heteronormativity’ and ‘cisnormativity’.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormative social discourses found in the curriculum negate sexuality outside the confines of heterosexual marriage and relationships conforming to the normative model of sexuality (Jose et al., 2023; NCERT, 2020). For instance, in Module 3, Activity 3.5 *Building Harmonious Relationships*, Case Study 3 presents the text: “Recently Vishal sent

a greeting card expressing his love for Simran” (NCERT, 2020, p. 51). By depicting a romantic interaction between a woman and a man, the curriculum assumes heterosexuality as the normative framework for relationships. Further, Module 9, Activity 9.3 *Vulnerability of Women and Adolescents to HIV*, Case Study 3 contains the following text: “After searching for a suitable partner, Rita and her parents identify Rohit as her future husband” (p. 155). This example presupposes the notion of marriage as a union between people of the opposite sex. Looking further in the text, Module 5, Activity 5.5 *Dealing with Gender-based Discrimination*, Case Study 2 includes “[Dinesh] is to get married soon. He insists on not accepting dowry from the girl’s family” (p. 84). While this discursive example does not challenge the heteronormative assumptions surrounding marriage between a woman and a man, it does present Dinesh resisting a system that objectifies women and enforces unequal power dynamics within marriage. His stance can be seen as a positive instance of challenging gender-based discrimination, even within the confines of heteronormative expectations. In another example, Module 9, Activity 9.6 *Responsible Sexual Behaviour*, Case Study 1 has the following text: “Her friend jokingly informed her that she will have to become pregnant soon after marriage. Malavika is quite upset with this information. She is not sure if she is ready to have a child at the moment” (p. 163). The expectation of pregnancy soon after marriage suggests that the relationship is inherently heterosexual and operates within the traditional gender roles assigned to women in such relationships. The “points for discussion” that follow, such as “Is Malavika old enough to be married?” and “What could be the possible consequences of having a child at this age?” encourage students to reflect on the consequences of societal expectations and how they impact women’s autonomy over their life choices (p. 163). In the same activity, Case Study 2

includes “Rita and Tejas got married recently...They do not want a child for some time. They have seen some couples have an unwanted pregnancy and want to avoid any such situation” (p. 163). This example reflects heteronormative assumptions by following a traditional path that links marriage with the expectation of future parenthood. In addition, these examples present ‘responsible sexual behavior’ strictly in the context of heterosexual marriages.

While the above discourses expressly emphasize heteronormative relationships and partnerships, they also represent a denial of any kind of sex that exists outside of reproduction (Chaturvedi, 2023; Narrain, 2004). Similar discourses of romantic and intimate relationships outside the confines of heteronormativity are absent in the curriculum. Such discursive practices create and sustain a power asymmetry that favors heteronormativity (Anand, 2016; Srivastava & Singh, 2015).

Cisnormativity

Discourses found in the curriculum give a false appearance of inclusiveness of transgender people (NCERT, 2020). In this way, the curriculum reinforces discrimination against the transgender community (Gulati & Anand, 2023). For instance, Module 10, Activity 10.5 *Violence, Injury and Seeking Help* includes: “Pallav belongs to the third gender. Some of his classmates harass/trouble him and sometimes they hit him. He does not come to school because he is too scared” (NCERT, 2020, p. 183). This is the only case study notably dedicated to transgender children. In addition, the Character Role Activity in Module 5, Activity 5.4 *Gender Power Walk* includes ‘third gender’ explicitly as one of the character roles, as illustrated below:

Roles in the chits are as follows

CHARACTER ROLES WRITTEN ON CHITS
Boy
Girl
Third gender
A girl who is living with disability
A boy who is living with disability

Figure 1. Character Roles (NCERT, 2020, p. 81)

Besides, transgender people are mentioned intermittently throughout the curriculum. For instance, in Module 5 *Gender Equality*, the text “the learners will develop a basic understanding of gender identity, including transgender...” shows an effort toward inclusivity (p. 73). In the same module, Activity 5.6 *Challenging Gender-based Violence* defines gender-based violence as “any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to someone (male, female, or transgender) based on gender norms, role expectations and stereotypes” (p. 86). While these discourses exhibit an attempt on the part of the curriculum to be somewhat inclusive, they still fail to be fully inclusive. The curriculum does not ensure that transgender identities, experiences, and perspectives are represented, respected, and affirmed throughout its content and approach.

Still, in other instances, the curriculum adopts a tokenistic approach. For example, Module 10, Activity 10.1 *What is Violence?* lists examples of sexual violence, including “unwanted comments of a sexual character, child sexual abuse with boys and girls, molestation and rape” (p. 168). These examples fail to mention transgender children. Again, in the same module, Activity 10.4 *Seeking Help to Keep Safe* includes statements, such as “both boys and girls can be abused” and “sexual abuse can happen to both boys and girls” (pp. 175, 177). These statements continue to exclude transgender children.

Similarly, Module 5, Activity 5.1 *What is Gender?* does not include a column for transgender people alongside ‘men and women’, as illustrated below:

Men	Women	

Figure 2. Draw the Table on the Board (NCERT, 2020, p. 74)

In stark contrast, the “points for discussion” following the activity asks learners, “Do you think transgender people should have the same rights as other genders?” (p. 75). In a group activity about understanding violence in Module 10, Activity 10.3 *Violence Within Schools and Its Effects*, facilitators are instructed to draw outlines of a female and a male on a chart paper and ask “learners to list different forms of violence that can happen in and around school. Make separate lists for male and female learners” (p. 174). Unfortunately, this activity not only excludes transgender children but also ignores the presence of gender-based violence against them. Below is an example provided to the facilitators “of what the diagram may look like”:

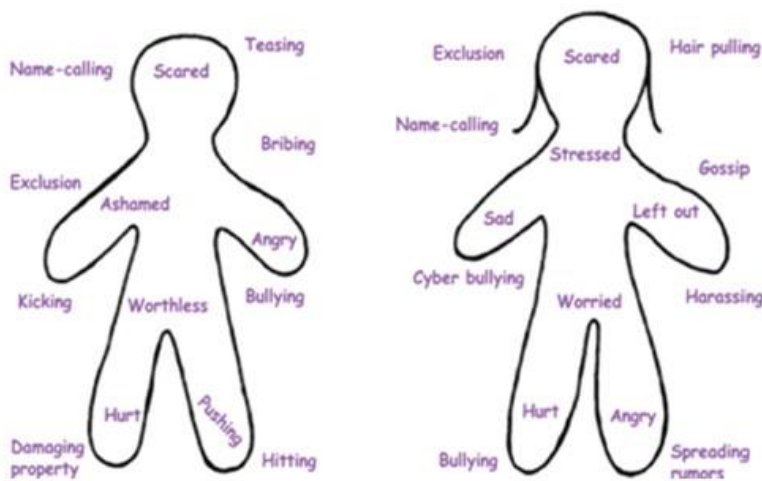


Figure 3. Make a Large Diagram (NCERT, 2020, p. 174)

The discourses that influence these illustrations and texts overlook the distress that can result from gender dysphoria and the familial and societal responses or consequences associated with it (Arvind et al., 2022; Reid, 2023; Srivastava et al., 2021). Apart from this, the curriculum also fails to include examples of the feelings of happiness and contentment (gender euphoria or joy) that some transgender people experience as a result of living in a way that is congruent with their gender identity (Chakrapani et al., 2022; Keenan, 2024; Srivastava et al., 2021). In this way, the curriculum could be seen as perpetuating deficit discourses of transgender people.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, the reading down of Section 377 and the NALSA judgment were considered incremental steps toward protecting and affecting minority rights in India (Gopal, 2019; Gulati & Anand, 2023). However, discourses present in the curriculum demonstrate how dominant groups and institutions abuse their power and privilege, leading to the stigma, discrimination, and marginalization encountered by women and sexual and gender minorities (Bhowal, 2022; Nagaraj, 2019; NCERT, 2020; Pasricha, 2023). Such discursive practices not only have the potency to perpetuate and sustain gender-based violence against these communities in familial and social settings but also lead to the subtle acceptance of such violence against them (Achar & Gopal, 2023; Arvind et al., 2022; Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2021).

Theme 5: Who or What Gets Left Out?

Gender hegemony, a system of domination and oppression that operates in the Indian socio-cultural environment, marginalizes and oppresses women and LGBTQ+ communities while privileging heterosexual males (Bhallamudi, 2022; Gopal, 2019; Lathabhavan et al., 2023; Maity, 2022; McCammon et al., 2022; Pufahl et al., 2021). It is

crucial to note that several discourses that could help resist power dynamics relevant in the Indian-specific context have been left out or remain unclear in the curriculum, depriving young people of this knowledge. This theme pertains to some of my preliminary questions, such as what content and themes lack clarity and how the curriculum addresses the pervasive issue of gender-based violence against girls and women in India. Additionally, this theme explores how effectively the curriculum equips young people to recognize and stop sexual harassment, abuse, and violence against girls and women as well as whether it perpetuates the ideas of the dominant group(s). I have divided this theme into five categories: ‘gendered access to public spaces’, ‘victim blaming discourses’, ‘domestic violence and intimate partner violence (IPV)’, ‘romantic relationships and dating’, and ‘discourses related to marriage’.

Gendered Access to Public Spaces

More than a decade after the brutal gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh and changes to the laws dealing with rape and sexual assault, which the Verma Committee described as an “expression of power”, sexual violence against women in India persists and even proliferates (Maity, 2022; Nieder et al., 2019; Titus, 2018, p. 233). Unfortunately, the AEP curriculum discourses fail to address how this ‘expression of power’ in the form of patriarchy perpetuates sexual violence against women, queer and transgender people, especially in public spaces. The curriculum defines sexual violence as “any sexual act or an attempt directed against a person’s sexuality, regardless of the relationship to the victim. Examples of sexual violence are unwanted comments of a sexual character, child sexual abuse with boys and girls, molestation and rape” (NCERT, 2020, p. 168). This definition does not encompass patriarchal values and the low status of women entrenched in Indian

society that create a threatening situation for them in public spaces. Further, Module 10, Activity 10.1 *What is Violence?* Story 2 explicitly depicts gender-based street harassment or ‘eve-teasing’, as illustrated below:

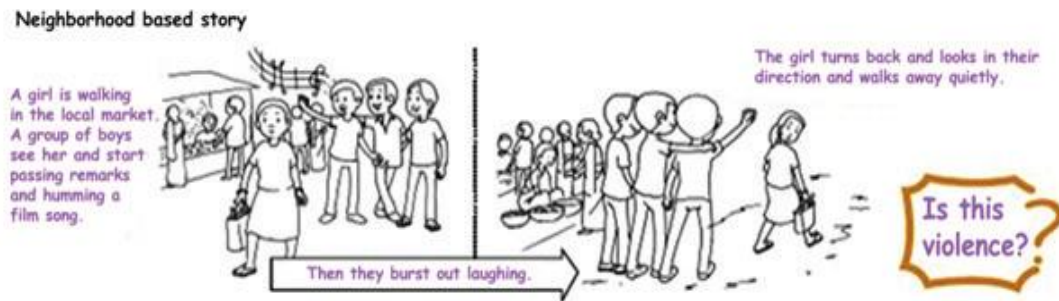


Figure 4. Story 2 (NCERT, 2020, p. 166)

However, the “points for discussion” that follow, such as “Is this violence? Why do you think so?”, “How would the girl feel in this situation?”, and “Do such incidents happen often with women and girls?” do not address the patriarchal ideology that breeds various forms of gender-based violence against women in India (p. 166). The absence of such discourses puts women at risk by placing them in a subordinate and disempowered position, also emphasized in the earlier themes. Besides, this illustration depicts binary gender representation, overlooking such violence against queer and transgender people. The only time the curriculum mentions the ‘patriarchal structure’ of Indian society is in the context of domestic violence in the same activity, Story 3: “In the third story, Shyam uses his power attributed by the patriarchal structures of society, over his wife and inflicts violence on her” (p. 168). This reduces such abuse and violence to terms like “wife-beating” and does not do justice to how violence manifests across different sexual and gender minorities, also reflected in the earlier theme of heteronormativity and cisnormativity (p. 168).

The curriculum falls short in exploring the relationship between patriarchal values and sexual violence against women, queer, and transgender communities (NCERT, 2020). In this way, the curriculum supports patriarchal discourses of gendered access to public spaces that essentially inspired contemporary feminist initiatives, such as the #WhyLoiter, the decriminalization of Section 377, and the formulation of the Transgender Protection Act (Arvind et al., 2022; Gopal, 2019; Jain, 2020). Such discursive practices underscore male domination and patriarchy that justify teaching women, queer, and transgender communities ‘a lesson’ for transgressing the patriarchal ideological framework (Nieder et al., 2019; Srivastava et al., 2021). This implies that those who violate or transgress this framework are themselves to blame for their victimhood (Arvind et al., 2022; Chatterjee, 2019; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Srivastava & Singh, 2015).

Victim Blaming Discourses

As was witnessed in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape in 2012, Indian patriarchal society blames women for gender-based violence enacted against them when they are thought to have violated the gender norms of the conservative society (Nieder et al., 2019). Subverting the societal attitudes that promote victim blaming discourses, the curriculum asserts that “It is never your fault if someone abuses you. It is always the fault of the person who abuses the child or adolescent. It is also not your fault if you are unable to say No or tell a trusted adult to seek help” (NCERT, 2020, p. 180). Other examples also aim to counter victim-blaming discourses, such as “Was it Annu’s fault that she experienced abuse? Possible answer: No it was not her fault”, “Remember the abuse is not your fault”, and “One shouldn’t be blamed for the violence one faces. It is not our fault if we face violence” (pp. 182, 184, 188).

Still, these discourses do not explain why victims of sexual violence or abuse, who are often girls and women, are held accountable for the violence and abuse they endure, nor do they address why victims should never be blamed for the crime perpetrated against them (Jain, 2020; Nieder et al., 2019; Roy, 2018). By sidestepping these important questions, these discourses fail to confront the moral policing of women by societal institutions through which patriarchy operates and continues to oppress women, also mirroring the earlier theme on gender-based restrictions (Felson & Palmore, 2021; Maity, 2022). This leads to the perpetuation of rigid gender norms imposed on girls and women that may lead to shortened education, early marriage and pregnancy, and increased vulnerability to sexual violence and coercion (McCammon et al., 2022).

Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Deep-seated cultural and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequities threaten the lives and well-being of women in India as they continue to face domestic violence and IPV every day (Lathabhavan et al., 2023; Mondal & Paul, 2023). Defining “violent or aggressive behavior within the home”, the AEP curriculum describes domestic violence as “not limited to physical violence but it can also involve emotional and sexual violence” (NCERT, 2020, p. 168). Although this definition encompasses physical, emotional, and sexual violence, it excludes other forms of domestic violence (e.g., verbal and economic violence). Additionally, it fails to acknowledge the gendered nature of such violence, particularly the heightened vulnerability of women and sexual and gender minorities to abuse within the home, echoing earlier themes on the binary norms of femininity and masculinity as well as heteronormativity and cisnormativity. The curriculum mentions “Protection of Women against Domestic Violence Act, 2005” and “Section 498A of IPC –

Indian Penal Code provides for criminal complaint in cases of domestic violence” under a list of “Laws and Policy to Safeguard Interests of Children and Adolescents”, nevertheless, discourses centered around these laws and policies are markedly absent (p. 216). The curriculum includes examples that allude to intimate partner violence (IPV) such as “[Dimpy’s boyfriend] hit her on her face” and “Overcome by anger, Shyam slaps his wife” (pp. 167, 183). However, it does not explicitly introduce the term IPV or explain how it is different from domestic violence. Furthermore, it does not discuss the predominance of IPV against women and what forms it can take in intimate relationships, such as verbal threats, extreme jealousy, stalking, isolation, acid attacks, and even rape. The absence of such discourses legitimizes gender-based violence by men and the subtle acceptance of such violence by women, who may normalize or tolerate it without even recognizing it, is also closely tied to the previously discussed theme on binary norms of femininity and masculinity.

A culture deeply rooted in patriarchal values and gender norms that fails to criminalize marital rape, coupled with the socio-cultural acceptance of the dowry practice, leaves women extremely vulnerable to violence and abuse due to the lack of critical discourse on these issues (Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023; Mitchell & Soni, 2021). Besides, by failing to conceive the gendered nature of violence within the confines of their homes, these discourses show a lack of interest or concern regarding violence perpetrated against queer and transgender people by family members (Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2021).

Romantic Relationships and Dating

Romantic feelings and relationships are strictly prohibited in Indian society, and girls face severe negative consequences for being romantically involved with boys, such as corporal punishment perpetrated by family members (Bansal et al., 2021; Hebert et al., 2020). The curriculum attempts to normalize romantic feelings and relationships by asserting that “feeling attracted towards another person during adolescence is normal” and that “attraction and romantic relationships are part of growing up” (NCERT, 2020, p. 53).

Despite arguing in favor of romantic relationships in adolescence, the curriculum refrains from including examples that depict typical dating activities for young people, such as having a movie night or taking a bike ride together. Additionally, discourses, such as “[Sonal] was in love with Vikram, ... and that relationship resulted in her pregnancy. Vikram went abroad a couple of months back and soon wrote back to her ending their relationship. Sonal went into depression” portray dating in a negative light by supporting a discourse that romantic feelings and relationships should be discouraged as they can bring shame and fear, especially for young girls and their families (Bansal et al., 2021; Bhallamudi, 2022; NCERT, 2020, p. 161). This exposes a double standard in sexual morality for girls and women, also reiterated in gender-based restrictions. Such discursive practices promote prevailing societal beliefs that families decide when and whom their daughters will marry, leaving young women with very little control over their life choices (Hebert et al., 2020).

Discourses Related to Marriage

In a nation where marriage is almost ubiquitous, highly gendered, and described as a union between persons of the opposite sex, discourses surrounding decisions related to marriage are missing (Das, 2014; Iyer, 2023; Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023; Lathabhavan et

al., 2023). Several discourses in the curriculum allude to the significance of marriage and family life, for instance, “Rita is 25 years old and wants to get married. After searching for a suitable partner, Rita and her parents identify Rohit as her future husband” and “Rita and Tejas got married recently and are happy with their marriage...They do not want a child for some time” (NCERT, 2020, pp. 155, 163). There is, however, no discussion on certain aspects related to marriage, such as the right to not marry, to choose one’s partner, and to decide when to marry (Das, 2014). Such discursive practices do not address the anxieties experienced by young people around decisions related to marriage. Such discussions are crucial in the Indian context, where the moral policing of girls and the enforcement of strict gender norms lead to early marriage and pregnancy for girls (McCammon et al., 2022). In addition, the curriculum does not include discourses that support the right or a desire to not marry or have children.

Discourses, such as these, impinge on the lives of young women, pressuring them into their future roles as housewives and caregivers, as prescribed for them by the culture, also explored earlier in family-oriented roles (Landry et al., 2020). Furthermore, by presuming that everyone is heterosexual, such discursive practices seem to impose compulsory heterosexuality, echoing the earlier theme on heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Stoddard, 2023). In this way, the curriculum ignores the reality that queer people do not yet have the legal right to marry in India (Bhattacharya & Sachdev, 2023).

In this section, I discussed themes or ‘discursive patterns’ present in the AEP curriculum that demonstrate how the Indian societal structure perpetuates patriarchal gender ideology and privileges heteronormativity. In the next section, I explore themes or ‘discursive patterns’ found in the supporting documents.

Supporting Documents

In this section, I explore the following supporting documents: the *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff Draft* (NCERT, 2023a), the *National Education Policy* (Government of India, 2020), the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCERT, 2005), and the *National Curriculum Framework for School Education* (NCERT, 2023b). My analysis exposes how institutional discursive practices legitimize and reinforce existing societal power relations that discriminate against sexual and gender minorities (Oughton, 2007). To analyze these discursive practices, I have used thematic analysis to categorize them into five discursive patterns: ‘stereotyping of transgender people’; ‘right to privacy and consent’; ‘conflation of LGBTQ+ terms’; ‘in(visibility) of transgender people’; and ‘silence on queerness’. Below, I present my critical discourse analysis of these themes in detail.

Theme 1: Stereotyping of Transgender People

Transgender people in India live in poor conditions owing to being denied jobs, working at low-paying jobs, being forced to sustain themselves through begging and dancing at weddings or childbirths, or engaging in sex work (Pandya & Redcay, 2021). However, since the NALSA judgment, India has made huge strides toward the socio-economic inclusion of the transgender community into mainstream society (Belur, 2022; Halim, 2017; Nazir, 2022). With a goal “towards sensitising the schools sector to be inclusive of transgender children”, the *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff* (NCERT, 2023a, p. ii) Annexure 3 includes “Success Stories of Transgender Persons”:

Dr. Manobi Bandhopadhyay (Trans-woman)...is the Principal of Dhola Mahavidyalaya at Calcutta University and is a Professor of Bengali literature...[Her] story inspires transgender youth to pursue education with full vigor. She has set an example so that the transgender students are getting better acceptance in the colleges. (p. 87)

Vihaan Peethambar (Trans-man), Expert Committee Member, National Council for Transgender Persons...[He] began to educate state government officials in Kerala on Sexual Orientations & Gender Identities (SOGI)... co-founded the first community-based organization for transmen in Kerala...[And] continues to advocate for transgender and queer rights at various forums in India and globally. (p. 89)

In stark contrast, other discourses in the module promote deficit discourses, echoing the AEP curriculum, by reinforcing gender stereotypes associated with transgender people. These discursive practices depict transgender people in their traditional occupation of begging and dancing at traffic signals or family festivities of strangers (Pandya & Redcay, 2021). For instance, Part 1, Session 1, *1.1.2 Ice-Breaking Session* proposes gender stereotypical discussion prompts (NCERT, 2023a):

Facilitators can initiate a brief discussion on the everyday interactions with transgenders. Participants could be asked to share their experiences encountering the transgenders. Some of the prompters for this discussion are as follows:

- During celebrations, local festivals, rituals or cultural events;

- At public places like streets, traffic light junctions, market places and other public spaces. (p. 4)

Further, Part 2, Session 2, 2.2.2. *Activities: Tools for Sensitisation* also proposes gender stereotypical situations for role-plays. The module includes role-play scenarios, for instance, “Suppose you are going to your workspace and you come across a group of transgender persons at the traffic light”, “You are attending a wedding wherein a group of transgender persons visit the venue to bless the couple”, and “Your neighbour has organised a party for the birth of their first child. A group of transgender persons come to the celebration to bless the child” (pp. 55 - 56).

One could argue that there is an attempt to disrupt the stereotyping of transgender people, however, it is also difficult to overlook the fact that their ‘success stories’ are only listed under “Additional Reading Materials” (pp. 87 - 90). Other discourses in the module consistently promote deficit discourses by reinforcing stereotypes that one can only interact with transgender people when they are begging at traffic signals or dancing at family festivities of strangers. Transgender people, like Madhu Bai Kinnar, Amruta Alpesh Soni, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, K. Prithika Yashini, Padmini Prakash, and Rose Venkatesan, have scripted history, shared their success stories, and have been working tirelessly for equal rights and representation for the community for decades (Almeida, 2021; Daftuar, 2015; Patkar, 2015). Such discursive practices as found in the module stand in violation of the NALSA judgment that upholds protection from discrimination and the right to equality for the transgender community (Arvind et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2017; Gulati & Anand, 2023).

Theme 2: Disregard for Privacy and Consent

The *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff* (NCERT, 2023a) makes several recommendations for school staff to make their learning environments safe for transgender children. Various social-cultural factors entrenched in Indian society cause psychological distress to transgender people, which impacts their lives negatively (Arvind et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023). Discourses in the module recognize that transgender children “are confronted with multiple layers of trauma and challenges” and “fear rejection, and are often depressed, isolated and are forced to leave their natal families” (NCERT, 2023a, p. 20). Other discourses fail to recognize that certain practices in school environments may jeopardize the safety and well-being of these children, also observed in my analysis of the AEP curriculum. For instance, Part 1, Session 2, *1.2.1 Challenges and Possibilities* guides teachers, principals, school administrators, other non-teaching staff, and community representatives with suggestions when faced with challenges concerning transgender children. It makes recommendations, such as “interact with the student’s peer groups” and “discuss with the parents” (p. 21). Such recommendations can be highly problematic as they do not take into account the child’s right to privacy and consent. Again, in Part 1, Session 2, *1.2.3 Advocating for Whole School Approach*, one of the suggestions listed is ‘access to appropriate restroom’:

school, where a transgender student has been given admission will have to ensure that if the child doesn’t feel comfortable in any of the toilets (Boys/Girls) in the school, a toilet may be assigned exclusively for transgender students as there are multiple toilets in schools. In case there is

a toilet for CWSN [Children with Special Needs] students that can also be shared by transgender students, if they feel comfortable. (p. 28)

In another example, Part 1, Session 2, *1.2.1 Challenges and Possibilities* lists one of the challenges faced by transgender students as “issues while going to the designated toilets” (p. 21). Discourses, such as the above, ‘out’ transgender children against their will to their peers and families, opening the door for violence and abuse both at school and at home (Chakrapani et al., 2022; Nagaraj, 2019; Srivastava et al., 2021).

Despite sincere intentions to promote a queer-inclusive learning environment that ensures the safety and well-being of transgender children, such discursive practices infringe upon their right to privacy and consent. This is reminiscent of Policy 713, in effect since 2020 in New Brunswick which lays out minimum requirements for school districts to create a safe, welcoming learning environment for LGBTQ+ students (Mazerolle, 2023; Yousif, 2023). The provincial government revised this policy in June 2023, requiring parental consent for transgender or non-binary students under 16 to use their preferred first name at school (Government of New Brunswick, 2023). A Grade 11 LGBTQ+ student in Saint John who was once chased down the halls and called slurs said this in support of Policy 713: “We think of school as this safe place for children, and with 713 in place, finally those things can taper down and happen less...And when they do happen, we can take them to the proper authorities...at school and make sure that they don’t happen anymore” (Rudderham, 2023). The revised policy limits a child’s right to privacy, accommodation, and equality. Discursive practices in the module could have similar implications in the Indian context. Disclosing the identity of transgender children compromises their safety and may have a detrimental impact on their mental and physical

health (Arvind et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023).

Theme 3: Conflation of LGBTQ+ Terms

In India, social discourses on LGBTQ+ communities are still very much restricted, making it difficult for heteronormative communities to develop knowledge and understanding of queer and transgender communities (Pufahl et al., 2021). Below are some examples of discourses in the *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff* that show this lack of knowledge and understanding (NCERT, 2023a). I have divided this theme into two categories: ‘conflation between transgender and intersex people’ and ‘a noun or an adjective?’.

Conflation Between Transgender and Intersex People

Discourses present in this module demonstrate ignorance of concepts related to LGBTQ+ identities through a conflation between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. The module includes the following texts: “this module specifically focusses upon transgender persons” and “the present module is specifically focussing upon transgender persons by birth” (pp. iii, v). By saying ‘transgender persons by birth’, the module seems to be referring to ‘intersex’ people, thereby conflating gender and sex.

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, as mentioned in the module, defines a ‘person with intersex variations’ as “a person who at birth shows variation in his or her primary sexual characteristics, external genitalia, chromosomes or hormones from normative standard of male or female” (p. 118). In addition to the above description of intersex people, in the ‘Glossary of Terms’ the term ‘hijra’ is defined as “traditional socio-cultural trans-feminine identity...” and “trans-woman (adj. trans-

feminine)” is described as a “person who was assigned male at birth but identifies with female/feminine gender” (pp. 131-132). Even after defining the terms clearly, it goes on to conflate between the two by asserting that “this module focusses upon creating inclusive educational ecology for individuals with intersex variation who are recognised with different socio-cultural identities, such as kinner, hijra, aravani, jogta and similar others” (p. 5). Such discursive practices can inadvertently propagate myths, inaccurate stereotypes, and misinformation about LGBTQ+ communities, which partly accounts for the stigma and discrimination faced by them (Arvind et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021).

A Noun or an Adjective?

The module advocates for an “inclusive curriculum” that is “modified with a transgender inclusive perspective” (NCERT, 2023a, p. 42). It clearly states that “the words “gay”, “lesbian” and “transgender” are adjectives that should be used with respect to describe people in their community, not words used in a negative way to hurt, insult, and degrade” (p. 43). However, in contradiction to the preceding assertion, other discourses frequently refer to the term ‘transgender’ as both a noun and an adjective. For instance, in the forward of the module, it states that “the present module is specifically designed to integrate one such gender, the transgender within the ambient of schooling practices”, referring to the term ‘transgender’ as a noun, disregarding its own advocacy for a ‘transgender inclusive perspective’ (p. v). In another example, it includes the following text: “Session - 1 will provide the participants a broad idea of transgender concerns, its integration schooling practices, constitutional and legal provisions for the transgenders...” (p. 1). In this example, the term ‘transgender’ shifts from an adjective to a noun. Further,

the module uses the term incorrectly at the beginning of Part 1 Session 1, for the school staff and other stakeholders. It describes the Ice-breaking Session as “Facilitators can initiate a brief discussion on the everyday interactions with transgenders. Participants could be asked to share their experiences encountering the transgenders” (p. 4). The goals of the activity are explained as follows: “The aim is to initiate a dialogue among the participants and bring to fore their experiences with transgenders and understanding transgender concerns” (p. 4). As can be seen, the module continues to conflate the term ‘transgender’ as a noun and an adjective in the same sentence in this example.

Such discourses underscore an absence of genuine interest or seriousness toward protecting the dignity of the transgender community, a violation of the NALSA judgment (Gulati & Anand, 2023). In the Indian societal structure, stigma and discrimination result from a lack of understanding and knowledge about LGBTQ+ communities (Ahuja et al., 2019; Bhowal, 2022; Jain, 2023; Nagaraj, 2019; Singha & Chakrabarty, 2022). Discourses, such as these, lay bare the gaps in the awareness and understanding of these communities in Indian society, also found in my analysis of the AEP curriculum. Such discursive practices also expose an unmindful and insensitive attitude toward these communities (Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2021). This creates a stressful, threatening, and negative social environment for LGBTQ+ individuals resulting in poor mental health (Anand, 2016; Arvind et al., 2022; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023).

Theme 4: In(Visibility) of Transgender People

Even if the Transgender Protection Act 2019, grants protection against discrimination, there are several obstacles standing in the way of this community achieving

full social status as a ‘third gender’ (Arvind et al., 2022). Below are some examples that highlight a trend that education policy discourses pay little attention to the experiences of transgender people, in addition to a lack of understanding or awareness of those experiences (Government of India, 2020; NCERT, 2005, 2020, 2023a, 2023b). For instance, the *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff* is tailored to further “acceptance, inclusion and retention of transgender children in schools” (NCERT, 2023a, p. i). It includes texts that repeatedly allude to transgender children experiencing gender dysphoria. Discourses such as “coming to terms with their own sexuality”, “internal challenges and confusions”, and “use of washroom, uniforms, especially when children are confused about their identity” point to a feeling of discomfort or a sense of unease between their biological sex and gender identity (p. 20). Other discourses, such as “emotional, behavioral, physical trauma due to changes/confusion leading to exclusion” also allude to transgender children experiencing gender dysphoria (p. 20). However, the hesitancy to mention the term explicitly in a module devoted to promoting the acceptance and inclusion of transgender children may indicate an unwillingness or a lack of understanding regarding the open discussion of such issues, mirroring the AEP curriculum.

In yet another example, the *National Education Policy* (Government of India, 2020) acknowledges the need to create a society that is “responsible towards its most vulnerable citizens” and establish “an equitable and just society” (pp. 24, 28). However, it does not grant transgender children a separate category status. Instead, they are categorized alongside girls in the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) that “can be broadly categorized based on gender identities (particularly female and transgender

individuals), socio-cultural identities (such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and minorities)...” (p. 24). The Policy further states that the Government of India:

will constitute a ‘Gender-Inclusion Fund’ to build the nation’s capacity to provide equitable quality education for all girls as well as transgender students. The fund will be available to States to implement priorities determined by the Central government critical for assisting female and transgender children in gaining access to education (such as the provisions of sanitation and toilets, bicycles, conditional cash transfers, etc.); funds will also enable States to support and scale effective community-based interventions that address local context-specific barriers to female and transgender children’s access to and participation in education. (p. 26)

By consistently coalescing the needs of female and transgender children, these discourses fail to realize that the needs of female and transgender children are vastly different and, therefore, should be addressed separately. Such discursive practices are unable to cater to the needs of transgender children, thereby further alienating them, as do the discursive practices of the AEP curriculum.

The *National Curriculum Framework for School Education* (NCERT, 2023b) emphasizes the importance of “an inclusive, enabling learning environment that provides every child with respect, openness, acceptance, meaningfulness, belonging, and challenge” (p. 100). However, the term ‘transgender’ appears only twice in its discourses. While articulating “appropriate practices based on the principles of inclusion”, the term ‘transgender’ appears for the first time, as seen below:

While the sections below detail measures for students with disability and those with special talents, the principles must also be practised in schools and school systems for any other form of difference, for example, transgender students, temporary migrants, physical differences, amongst others. (p. 182)

Transgender people are mentioned for the second and last time in the context of “education of Art in schools” (p. 370). The text states: “Schools can organise lecture demonstrations by various artists (men, women, and transgender) who are known locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally to inspire students to engage with the Arts” (p. 375). Discourses in education policies, such as these, engage in the practice of tokenism by making only a perfunctory effort to be inclusive of the transgender community. Conversely, the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCERT, 2005) does not even acknowledge the existence of transgender people despite their centuries-long observable presence in Indian society (Chakrapani et al., 2017).

These discourses highlight that a lack of attention to the experiences of transgender people and their inclusion merely symbolically, directly or indirectly, legitimizes existing power asymmetries. Such discursive practices deny transgender people equal status in Indian society even after obtaining legal status as a ‘third gender’ for almost a decade (Gulati & Anand, 2023).

Theme 5: Silence on Queerness

Despite the legal decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, Indian laws currently do not protect same-sex relationships from stigma, discrimination, and violence (Gopal, 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021). In the realm of education, policy discourses have chosen to

remain silent on the existence of queer people in Indian society. For instance, even though the *National Education Policy* claims that it is committed “to attaining full inclusion and equity” and “respect, dignity, and privacy of all persons”, it remains silent on the presence of queer children in Indian schools, reverberating the AEP curriculum (Government of India, 2020, p. 28; NCERT, 2020).

In a similar vein, the *National Curriculum Framework for School Education* proclaims its devotion “to achieving an inclusive and equitable society in which every citizen has the opportunity to dream, learn, thrive, and contribute”, however, it overlooks the existence of queer children in Indian classrooms, also echoing the AEP curriculum (NCERT, 2020; NCERT, 2023b, p. 180).

The *National Curriculum Framework* agrees that there is “deep gender bias and pervasive patriarchal values in Indian society” (NCERT, 2005, p. 66). The policy explains that “often girls are burdened from an early age with domestic chores” and increasingly “subject to stereotypical expectations based on notions of their future roles as wives and mothers rather than enabling them to develop their capabilities and claim their rights” (pp. 83, 96). However, these discourses turn a blind eye to the heteropatriarchal nature of Indian society, also palpable in the AEP curriculum, that exposes the ongoing marginalization of queer people and communities (Ahuja et al., 2019; Bhattacharya & Sachdev, 2023; Bhowal, 2022; Srivastava, 2021). Discursive practices in learning environments that acknowledge the presence of queer people play a crucial role in alleviating anxiety associated with disclosing their sexual orientation to family or peers (Achar & Gopal, 2023). Life outside the closet is happier because it provides mental peace and control over their own lives (Biswas et al., 2022).

Summary of the Chapter

In this chapter, I provided detailed information on how societal power relations are established and reinforced with implicit and explicit messages and gendered discourses in the AEP curriculum and four education policy documents. These documents perpetuate the marginalization, oppression, and domination of women, queer, and transgender people in the Indian socio-cultural environment. In the next chapter, I engage in a detailed interpretation and explanation of these discursive patterns. Further, I elaborate on the significance and implications of these patterns.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I presented the discursive patterns found in my analysis of five Indian government documents carried out for this thesis. The analysis involved a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach in thematic document analysis. This qualitative study was designed to critically examine and analyze gender ideology and institutionalized power asymmetries that shape and influence curriculum discourses in schools in India. My inquiry was framed around the following research question: How is the national curriculum of the Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) in India influenced by dominant discourses of gender and sexuality? This chapter aims to summarize my response to this research question.

In this chapter, I provide my interpretations and key takeaways from these findings. I explain how a restructuring of the AEP curriculum discursive practices can address the structural and power inequities that women and LGBTQ+ people face in a highly heteropatriarchal Indian society. I also discuss how this curriculum restructuring can help young learners critique notions of inequality, exploitation, oppression, and dominance at school and within wider society. Finally, I discuss steps to be taken at both the school level and on a systemic level to push back against the harms that have impacted women and LGBTQ+ communities and continue to affect their daily lives even today.

The analysis of the data suggested gendered discourses, such as patriarchal gender norms and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, have a significant influence on the AEP curriculum. This study also highlighted how the values of the state are transmitted through discourses in the curriculum that deny sex outside of reproduction and adopt a tokenistic approach toward transgender people. In the sections below, I unpack

these discursive patterns by interpreting the emergent themes from the findings chapter. Furthermore, I explore how these discursive patterns speak to the existing literature and provide two key recommendations for sexuality education in schools in India.

Primary Document: Training and Resource Material

In this section, I present my interpretations of the themes or discursive patterns that emerged in my critical analysis of the *Training and Resource Material: Health and Wellness of School-Going Children* (NCERT, 2020) or the AEP curriculum. These discursive patterns demonstrate that the Indian societal structure not only maintains and sustains patriarchal gender values and ideology but also privileges heteronormativity. Below, I elaborate on my interpretations of these discursive patterns related to gender-based restrictions, binary norms of femininity and masculinity, gender-prescribed familial roles, heteronormativity and cisnormativity, and who or what gets left out.

To begin with, the Indian patriarchal society gives families and communities the right to dictate the lives of girls and women, resulting in their subordination and disempowerment (Bhallamudi, 2022; Hebert et al., 2020; McCammon et al., 2022; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Narrain, 2004; Nieder et al., 2019). Despite being cognizant of the need to recognize and challenge gender-based discrimination in the Indian socio-cultural environment, patriarchal discourses embedded in the curriculum simply serve to legitimize more freedom for boys while promoting close monitoring and surveilling of girls and women. This is done through discourses, such as Reena's father and Laali's maternal uncle imposing mobility restrictions on them (NCERT, 2020). Bhallamudi (2022) and McCammon et al. (2022) agree that Indian families prescribe and enforce a rigid set of gender norms on girls and women that dictate appropriate behavior. This enforcement of

strict gender norms and behavior by male members within Indian familial settings is a reflection of male dominance over women in Indian society (Deosthali et al., 2022; Hebert et al., 2020; Jain, 2020; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Roy, 2018). Such discursive practices not only normalize gender hierarchies but also miss the opportunity to help adolescent boys critique patriarchal gender attitudes. Rigid gender norms that are deeply ingrained in the Indian societal structure hinder the future life directions of young girls and women in terms of education as well as career advancement (Landry et al., 2020). Furthermore, patriarchal discourses also confine boys and men to tiny boxes that pressure them to conform to specific behaviors, with deviation seen as taking a step down on society's ladder (Bansal et al., 2021; Nieder et al., 2019).

Moreover, patriarchal discourses found in the curriculum validate the sexual control of women by repressing their sexual desires and expression. These discourses shame women for having 'dirty thoughts' or watching 'inappropriate content' (NCERT, 2020). Whereas other patriarchal discourses, such as a group of boys deciding to visit a sex worker, grant boys and men unrestricted sexual freedom (p. 154). Bhallamudi (2022) confirms that Indian families, and by extension, the society, control women's sexuality to carefully maintain gendered boundaries and respectable femininity. Such discursive practices promote a victim blaming mentality that blames women for sending boys and men 'wrong signals' by engaging in behavior that violates appropriate gender norms (Chatterjee, 2019; Maity, 2022; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Narrain, 2004; Nieder et al., 2019).

Therefore, such discourses necessitate that curriculum writers replace patriarchal discourses that perpetuate gender hierarchies, depict men wielding power over women, and

shame women for expressing sexual desires with discourses that do not enforce a power dynamic in familial and community settings. The curriculum should instead include examples where girls and women have the autonomy to make their own decisions regarding their mobility and enjoy the freedom to discuss topics of sexual nature openly and freely. Such restructuring will help adolescent boys shed patriarchal values and attitudes while also teaching the value of equality and respect toward all girls and women, leading to a more equitable society.

Along the same lines, while women in India are encouraged to internalize gender norms of submission and subservience, men internalize those of domination and control (Nieder et al., 2019). Even if curriculum discourses aim to engender ‘new norms of masculinity and femininity’, they depict women within traditional norms of femininity that suggest that women should be passive, forgiving, and enduring in the face of abuse, while portraying men as abusive and violent without explicitly addressing the gendered nature of such violence. Discursive examples, for instance, a boyfriend slapping his girlfriend or a husband hitting his wife, undermine the intended goal of transforming gender norms (NCERT, 2020). Dhanaraj and Mahambare (2022) and Nieder et al. (2019) confirm that such discursive practices mirror the normative behavioral standards for women and men as contextualized within Indian society (Deosthali et al., 2022; John, 2020; Narrain, 2004; Roy, 2018), resulting in power hierarchies that legitimize several types of violence by men and its acceptance by women (Godbole, 2021; Jain, 2020; Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Upadhyay, 2015).

For these reasons, the discourses above highlight the need to restructure the curriculum by amending content that permeates prevailing norms of femininity and

masculinity. Taking their own advice into consideration, curriculum authors must make a concerted effort to replace discourses that portray women and men in traditional norms of femininity and masculinity. Instead, the curriculum should present examples of strong, confident women who are not afraid to stand up for themselves and boyfriends/husbands who are kind, gentle, and caring toward their partners. This shift would help bring about progressive models of femininity and masculinity. Furthermore, failing to explicitly engage students in a discussion on intimate partner violence (IPV) denies them the opportunity to learn that these behaviors are not only wrong but also against the law (Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023). Such restructuring would help young people to question and challenge regressive norms of femininity and masculinity and promote gender equity.

The patriarchal structure of Indian society also views women as better suited to be housewives and caregivers and men as breadwinners, thereby perpetuating gender asymmetries (Bhallamudi, 2022; Košir & Lakshminarayanan, 2023). While curriculum discourses depict adolescent boys performing household chores, gender-prescribed roles for women and men are consistently depicted in adulthood (NCERT, 2020). Women are shown as housewives responsible for domestic chores and childrearing and men as primary financial providers (pp. 100, 167). Such discursive practices display gender disparities that disadvantage girls by dictating their future life trajectory as wives and mothers and limiting their opportunities and achievements (Kaur & Kapoor, 2021; Landry et al., 2020). Bhallamudi (2022), Košir and Lakshminarayanan (2023), and McCammon et al. (2022) concur that gender discourses that support, foster, and affirm patriarchy and gender bias produce a network of circumstances that limit the opportunities for women.

Thus, curriculum writers must remove any material that presents women and men in strict gender roles and include examples that depict them in nontraditional roles. For instance, men taking care of the home and raising children, and women in leadership or professional roles. Such restructuring would help young learners critique traditional gender roles that stand in the way of achieving gender equity in Indian society.

Furthermore, the heteropatriarchal nature of Indian society validates unfavorable attitudes toward sexual and gender identities (Pufahl et al., 2021). Heteronormative discourses in the curriculum emphasize a denial of any kind of sex that exists outside of reproduction, thereby privileging heteronormativity (Iyer, 2023; Narrain, 2004; NCERT, 2020; Reid, 2023). Das (2014) confirms that curriculum discursive practices do not provide young people with adequate information on queer people and communities. Alluding to the non-existence of non-normative identities in Indian society by refraining from using words such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘queer’, or ‘same-sex’, the curriculum invisibilizes these communities, who are already stigmatized and discriminated against in the Indian socio-cultural environment (Pufahl et al., 2021). These discourses not only tell young queer people that they are not important but also miss the opportunity to address harmful global myths, such as HIV/AIDS is a ‘gay disease’ or that homosexuality is ‘curable’. This could have been an excellent opportunity to debunk such global myths that are still persistent today. While the Supreme Court of India urges the Central Government to uphold the rights of the queer community and put an end to the discrimination against them, it is time that queer people have a place in the AEP curriculum (Yasir & Travelli, 2023).

In a similar vein, transphobic discourses in the curriculum reinforce stigma, discrimination, and violence against the transgender community. By including discourses

that ask learners if transgender people should have the same rights as other genders, the curriculum cannot obscure the fact that it privileges heteronormativity (NCERT, 2020). The hesitancy to include transgender people on an equal footing with cis people in its discourses suggests that Indian society has not fully embraced this community thus far (Arvind et al., 2022; NCERT, 2020). In this way, cis peers fail to benefit from these queer and trans-affirming discourses (Keenan, 2024).

Arvind et al. (2022), Ganju and Saggurti (2017), and Srivastava et al. (2021) claim that transgender people experience immense psychological stressors in Indian society from their biological families and the wider society. Discursive practices of omission inadvertently teach young learners that the struggles of transgender people are not important or worth discussing (Nagaraj, 2019; Pandya & Redcay, 2021). Additionally, the curriculum also fails to include examples of gender euphoria or joy that transgender people experience as a result of living in a way that is congruent with their gender identity (Chakrapani et al., 2022; Keenan, 2024; Srivastava et al., 2021). Due to such absences, cis learners miss out on the peer support that they could provide to their transgender peers (Chowdhury, 2015; Kumar, 2022; Mazumdar, 2022; Ramesh, 2020). This also fails to allow them to critically examine their privileged position at school and in the larger society (Kumar, 2022; Kumar, 2024).

Hence, curriculum writers must move beyond perfunctory efforts to be inclusive of transgender people and provide them with an equal space with cis people. It is crucial to replace examples that may perpetuate deficit discourses and include examples that make space for gender euphoria or joy (Chakrapani et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021). Stigma,

discrimination, and marginalization experienced by them should also form an essential component of discursive practices to make the curriculum truly inclusive.

Also, several other discourses pertinent to the Indian-specific context that could help in resisting power dynamics associated with patriarchal ideology and the privileging of heteronormativity have been left out or remain unclear in the curriculum. In Chapter Five, I presented discursive patterns related to gendered access to public spaces, victim blaming discourses, domestic violence and intimate partner violence (IPV), romantic relationships and dating, and discourses regarding marriage.

For example, the patriarchal ideological framework underpinning the Indian societal structure that ‘punishes’ women who violate or transgress this framework remains unexplored in the curriculum discourses (Chatterjee, 2019; Nieder et al., 2019). This needs to be addressed if we want women to lead their lives without fear and anxiety about their safety. This is particularly relevant in the context of Indian society, where there is a high prevalence of sexual assault and harassment of women in public spaces (Maity, 2022; McCammon et al., 2022; Nieder et al., 2019). This gap hinders the development of constructive changes in views toward gender and sexuality by failing to provide opportunities for boys to engage in critical dialogue with girls on the structural and power inequities that girls and women face (Godbole, 2021; Jain, 2020; Jha & Kurian, 2018; John, 2020; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Roy, 2018; Upadhyay, 2015). This is in line with Landry et al. (2020) and Verma et al. (2006), who are of the opinion that such discourses should be part of universal sexuality education in India. It is necessary to address gender attitudes in adolescence before they become cemented and continue to perpetuate gender disparities throughout adulthood.

Discourses that fail to discuss the gendered nature of violence in public spaces impact queer and transgender people by making them vulnerable to abuse and violence (Anand, 2016; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017; Pandya & Redcay, 2021; Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2023). Chatterji (2020) and Das (2014) agree that the AEP curriculum overlooks the vulnerabilities of queer and transgender communities. It is important to understand these absences, which may lead to a better understanding of the discrimination, oppression, and lack of support and acceptance that these communities experience. Ahuja et al. (2019), Arvind et al. (2022), and Pufahl et al. (2021) also claim that educational interventions can effectively reduce prejudice and violence against these communities.

In addition, curriculum discourses do not teach why victims of sexual violence or abuse, who are often girls and women, are blamed for the abuse and violence against them and why victims should not be blamed for the crime perpetrated against them. Women in India are frequently held responsible for their experiences of gender-based violence, putting them under enormous social pressure to conform to societal norms that limit their freedom (Chatterjee, 2019; Felson & Palmore, 2021; Maity, 2022; Nieder et al., 2019). It is not enough to teach young people that one should not be blamed for the violence one experiences (NCERT, 2020). This gap misses the opportunity to engage boys to critically examine gender power dynamics that continue to obstruct the upliftment and empowerment of girls and women in Indian society (Jain, 2020; Moraes & Sahasranaman, 2018; Roy, 2018; Upadhyay, 2015). Such discourses provide an excellent opportunity to increase awareness and sensitize boys to the discrimination girls face in their families and communities (Landry et al. 2020). The addition of such discourses would help boys

develop positive gender attitudes and break the chain of intergenerational transmission of victim blaming discourses.

Further, the curriculum fails to provide an accurate understanding of domestic violence within households. It describes domestic violence as physical, emotional, and sexual violence, excluding other forms of domestic violence, such as verbal and economic violence (NCERT, 2020). There is also an absence of knowledge regarding intimate partner violence (IPV) and its impact on women. This lack of information may not only make young people vulnerable to abuse and violence in their own homes but also fail to equip them with the knowledge and understanding to recognize abuse when they witness it in their neighborhoods and surroundings (Berthod, 2009; Roy, 2018; Sinha et al., 2023). It is essential to educate girls on such sensitive issues and engage them in discussions that provide them with information on the laws that protect them against violence (Agarwal et al., 2022; Lathabhavan et al., 2023; Mondal & Paul, 2023; Verma et al., 2017). Likewise, this knowledge is also essential for boys to enable them to shed off normative beliefs of masculinity acquired from society and learn the value of equality and respect toward their female partners and women in general (Sinha et al., 2023). Learning about healthy relationship skills lowers the risk of perpetrating gender-based violence against women (Sinha et al., 2023; Verma et al., 2006). Domestic abuse, harassment, and dowry-related murders in India will continue to rise unless gender education through sexuality education curriculum discourses discuss these topics explicitly.

In addition to the above, these discourses also validate abuse and violence toward queer and transgender people in their homes by ignoring the gendered nature of domestic violence in familial settings (Srivastava & Singh, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2021). Both

Chatterji (2020) and Das (2014) are in agreement that the AEP curriculum does not pay attention to the vulnerabilities of queer and transgender communities. Anand (2016) and Pufahl et al. (2021) claim that young people are more accepting of these communities, and therefore, curriculum discourses can be a powerful tool to encourage dialogue to further acceptance and greater sympathy. This would bring in heteronormative peers as their supporters in their fight against marginalization and oppression (Ahuja et al., 2019).

Moreover, curriculum discourses argue in favor of romantic feelings and attraction by asserting that feeling an attraction toward another person during adolescence is normal (Bansal et al., 2021; Hebert et al., 2020; NCERT, 2020). However, refraining from including examples that explicitly depict young people dating or portraying dating in a negative light may be a missed opportunity (NCERT, 2020, p. 161). Such discursive practices fall short of equipping young girls and boys with healthy romantic relationship skills that are necessary for navigating their dating lives (Bansal et al., 2021). Also, young boys miss the opportunity to critically analyze patriarchal norms that bring shame and fear to their female counterparts and their families (Bansal et al., 2021; Hebert et al., 2020). Such discursive practices also do not provide enough room for boys to consider what they can do to challenge and shift inequitable and restrictive gender norms. Landry et al. (2020) confirm that adolescence is a unique opportunity for cultivating positive gender attitudes before they become solidified. Therefore, it is crucial for curriculum writers to make the most of this opportunity to foster progressive perspectives on gender.

Lastly, Indian society strongly values the highly gendered institution of marriage, as evident from the discourses found in the curriculum (Das, 2014; Kadyan & Unnithan, 2023; NCERT, 2020). However, curriculum writers can empower girls and women by

integrating discourses, such as the right to not marry, to choose one's partner, and to decide when to marry (Das, 2014). Equally important are discourses that show women's right to choose something other than the culturally prescribed roles of wives and mothers (Bhallamudi, 2022).

Besides, curriculum writers must be careful about presuming universal heterosexuality (Jones, 2011). Discourses related to queer people who do not yet have the right to marry and how they are seeking recognition of same-sex marriages in India should find a place in the curriculum (Bhattacharya & Sachdev, 2023; Gupta, 2023). This will allow young cis and straight people to critique and examine heteronormative acts of domination and marginalization and to understand their own privileged positionality as opposed to their queer peers (Pufahl et al., 2021). Such practices will also let young queer people know that they are not alone and that the marginalizing influence of the highly patriarchal society is not being left unquestioned.

This section provided my understanding of the findings of the primary document. In the following section, I elaborate on my interpretations of the findings of the supporting documents that provide India's broader social context concerning education.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Supporting Documents

In this section, I present my interpretations of discursive patterns that emerged in my critical analysis of the following documents: the *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff Draft* (NCERT, 2023a), the *National Education Policy* (Government of India, 2020), the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCERT, 2005), and the *National Curriculum Framework for School Education* (NCERT, 2023b). My interpretations of discursive patterns relate to the awareness, knowledge, and

understanding of sexual and gender identities in Indian society. Below, I elaborate on my interpretations of these discursive patterns concerning stereotyping of transgender people, right to privacy and consent, conflation of LGBTQ+ terms, in(visibility) of transgender people, and silence on queerness.

Discourses permeating the *Integrating Transgender Concerns in Schooling Processes: A Module for School Staff Draft* reinforce stereotypes associated with the transgender community rather than breaking them (NCERT, 2023a). To uphold protection against discrimination and the right to equality for transgender people, education policymakers must remove content that stereotypes this community and include discussions of their achievements and success stories as core components for school staff (Almeida, 2021; Belur, 2022; Daftuar, 2015; Deshpande, 2022; Doshi, 2017; Halim, 2017; Krishnan, 2017; Marik, 2021; Patkar, 2015). Such concerted efforts by policymakers will help correct myths, inaccurate stereotypes, and misinformation about transgender people. These endeavors will also educate heteronormative people on transgender identities and issues and make space for gender nonconformity and euphoria (Arvind et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2022; Keenan, 2024; Srivastava et al., 2021).

Other discourses in the module infringe upon the right to privacy and consent of transgender children (NCERT, 2023a). Such discursive practices not only 'out' transgender children to their families and peers but also make them susceptible to abuse and violence instead of protecting them. This is substantiated by Srivastava et al. (2021) that most transgender people experience violence and abuse during childhood at home and school, resulting in a deterioration of their physical and mental health. To better understand which policies protect transgender children and which ones put them at risk within their families

and communities, policymakers must consider their recommendations for school staff very carefully (Bakshi, 2022; Das, 2022; Jacob, 2021; Keenan, 2024; Kumar, 2022; Kumar, 2024; Mazumdar, 2022; Nagaraj, 2019; Ramesh, 2020). After a thorough review, policies that put transgender children at risk must be replaced by policies that help school staff better support the needs of transgender children by making the school environment not only safe but also welcoming.

In addition, the module uses inaccurate language and concepts related to LGBTQ+ identities (NCERT, 2023a). Such discourses lay bare the gaps in the awareness and understanding of transgender people in India. This partly accounts for the stigma and discrimination faced by them, which is also confirmed by Chakrapani et al. (2017). It is crucial to bridge such gaps in knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ communities that may help school staff create an inclusive environment for students from these communities (Baral, 2022; Bhowal, 2022; Cavanaugh et al., 2023; Das, 2022; Jacob, 2021; Jain, 2023; Keenan, 2024; Kumar, 2022; Kumar, 2024; Mazumdar, 2022; Nagaraj, 2019; Ramesh, 2020; Singh, 2022). Educated school staff, who understand the experiences and realities of LGBTQ+ students, further educate heteronormative students about these communities. This can lead to the integration of marginalized communities into mainstream society.

Discrimination occurs not just through acts of violence and abuse toward the transgender community, but also by failing to include this community on an equal footing. This absence of genuine attention by avoiding discussions on gender dysphoria, including transgender people merely symbolically, or through deficit discourses, represents a serious gap (Government of India, 2020; NCERT, 2023a, 2023b). Policy discourses will only be able to contribute to reducing stigma and raising awareness about the transgender

community when policymakers truly embrace them with open arms (Arvind et al., 2022; Bakshi, 2022; Belur, 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2022; Chhotaray & Pathak, 2022; Nayar & Vinu, 2023; Srivastava et al., 2021).

Finally, denying sexual diversity in education policy discourses brings to the fore the ‘heteronormalizing techniques’ that schools use to render heterosexuality the norm and same-sex desires a deviance (Allen, 2004; Jose et al., 2023; Reid, 2023; Sur, 2021). This alienates Indian youth who do not conform to heteronormative hegemony and grow up feeling confused and marginalized, impacting their physical and mental health (Anand, 2016; Bakshi, 2022; Bhowal, 2022; Jain, 2023; Pufahl et al., 2021; Srivastava & Singh, 2015). Education policymaking must not overlook the existence of queer students in Indian schools and classrooms and should acknowledge the heteropatriarchal nature of Indian society that marginalizes queer people and communities (Ahuja et al., 2019; Bhattacharya & Sachdev, 2023; Bhowal, 2022; Government of India, 2020; Jain, 2023; Kumar, 2022; Kumar, 2024; Mazumdar, 2022; NCERT, 2005, 2023b; Pradhan, 2022; Ramesh, 2020; Reid, 2023). If only this is achieved, policy discourses will be able to work toward educating society about LGBTQ+-related issues in the Indian-specific context to further acceptance and greater empathy among peers and educators who identify as heteronormative (Ahuja et al., 2019; Cavanaugh et al., 2023; Pufahl et al., 2021).

Recommendations

So far in this chapter, I have presented several interpretations of the discursive patterns apparent in the selected documents for this study. Although these discursive patterns express a desire to challenge and disrupt gender hierarchies that oppress women and LGBTQ+ communities, they ultimately reinforce patriarchal gender norms. Efforts to

address violence against girls and women and to question masculine gender norms remain insufficient to challenge the existing power structures. The discourses also reveal the different ways that the experiences of sexual and gender identities are erased while policymaking continues to transmit prevailing gendered discourses. In this section, I provide suggestions that curriculum and education policy writers may take into consideration to better support the needs of school-going adolescents and achieve an equitable and just society. Based on my analysis, I propose two key recommendations. My first recommendation is to integrate a critical perspective informed by comprehensive sexuality education. My second recommendation is that sexuality education policymakers engage in critical self-reflection. This section will also speak to the limitations of the research methodology and other considerations to provide even further support for young people and their needs, such as children with mental health conditions.

Integration of a Critical Perspective Informed by Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Schools are seen as an ideal environment for critiquing, challenging, and questioning power dynamics and gender equities (Iyer, 2019). Comprehensive sexuality education encourages young people to examine and question notions of inequality, exploitation, oppression, and domination and deconstruct pervasive hegemonic structures in society. It recognizes the agency and rights of young people to make their own decisions and provides opportunities for youth to voice their opinions through productive and reflective discussions surrounding gender and sexuality (Das, 2014; Malik, 2022). This allows students to actively engage with and respond to society's privileging of certain groups of people (e.g., heterosexual men). Thus, comprehensive sexuality education helps address inequitable relationships and the harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence.

As explored in the findings chapter, gender norms and stereotypes reflect the societal understanding of appropriate behavior for women and men. They are usually transferred across generations and learned mainly informally from different sources, including families, communities, and the larger society (Bansal et al., 2021; McCammon et al., 2022). The maintenance of patriarchy or male dominance in a society is generally considered a risk factor associated with the occurrence of violence (Sinha et al., 2023). Women often experience violence even when they conform to traditional gender norms, as adherence to these roles does not protect them from harm (Dhanaraj & Mahambare, 2022). When women, transgender people, or non-binary people challenge traditional gender norms, inequitable power relations cause tension within society that, in turn, results in increased violence against them. This phenomenon is defined as patriarchal backlash in the literature (Anand, 2016; Arvind et al., 2022; Nieder et al., 2019). Patriarchal backlash is an increase in violence perpetrated by men to maintain established traditional gender roles and reinstate power, authority, and control (Nieder et al., 2019). In societies with rigid patriarchal gender norms, women are discouraged from leaving their homes. This is justified by the perceived dangerousness of public spaces and the need to protect women.

LGBTQ+ communities in India face prejudice, discrimination, and violence, alongside legal, political, economic, and social barriers that hinder their full social participation in society (Pufahl et al., 2021). Sexuality education offers the opportunity to address gender inequities through a critical understanding. This kind of sexuality education encourages students to actively participate in knowledge creation and transform oppressive power structures that continue to oppress women and LGBTQ+ communities.

I would, therefore, recommend a commitment to developing comprehensive sexuality education that helps young people assert their sexual rights, encourages critical reflection about gender roles, and addresses inequitable relationships and harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence. I would also recommend that curriculum writers engage with critical literature that seeks to disrupt deficit discourses, such as literature that focuses on queer joy and gender euphoria (Achar & Gopal, 2023; Biswas et al., 2022; Chakrapani et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2021).

Critical Self-Reflection by Sexuality Education Policymakers

Sexuality education policymaking is inextricably intertwined in a complex web of power relations wherein young people, particularly girls and LGBTQ+ adolescents, are subjected to “normalizing judgment” (Foucault, 1977, p. 53). Normalizing judgment refers to the enforcement of established or desired behavioral norms through specific techniques designed to correct transgressions and minimize deviations from those norms (Welch, 2009). Thus, policymaking is influenced by dominant discourses, validated by those with institutional power to produce and circulate gender hierarchies and asymmetries through official legislation nationwide. The reproduction of dominant discourses contributes to the reinforcement of the status quo. It is my recommendation that sexuality education policymakers, like the NCERT, adopt a reflective stance and interrogate their own assumptions and ideological presuppositions that are responsible for the discursive contours hindering attempts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational and social system for all. This can be done by engaging in dialogue with advocacy groups, such as the Naz Foundation and Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues (TARSHI), which work on a range of issues with young people on the ground.

As every emancipatory endeavor implies, CDA serves as a tool for envisioning a more equitable and just society that will recognize the rights of all people. CDA has the “potential to make transparent the power/knowledge grid inscribed in the prevalent discursive constructs of the policy documents” that subjugate youth and create inequalities of power (Liasidou, 2008, p. 495). This research study may have a substantial bearing on the attempts for educational and social change in favor of women, transgender, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ communities and their allies. CDA alone cannot bring about change unless the structural bases of oppression and exclusion are challenged (p. 495). Organizations, like the NCERT, that have been set up by the Government of India for qualitative improvement in school education may use the findings of this research study for curriculum development, policy, and practices in sexuality education.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This research study relies solely on five documents published by the Government of India in the English language. It does not include the perspectives of students, teachers, in-school counselors, or independent facilitators who have encountered the AEP curriculum. Their perspective and insight could have been valuable to understanding how they perceive and navigate gender inequities permeating the curriculum. In addition, the focus of this study is on gender, heteronormative, and cisnormative discourses and overlooks the ways that other discourses in the documents also contribute to marginalizing and oppression in the Indian socio-cultural environment.

Although this study recognizes that the AEP curriculum used in Indian schools is largely targeted toward school-going adolescents, future efforts must be made to include sexuality education for adolescents who are out of school due to a variety of reasons,

including poverty, distance of school from home, or familial responsibilities. It may be important to bring more of an intersectional lens surrounding this curriculum based on gender and disability, sexuality and caste/class, or gender/sexual orientation and mental health to make it truly inclusive of all children. Future researchers must commit to developing a comprehensive sexuality education that promotes the rights of young people, encourages critical reflection on gender roles, and addresses inequitable relationships and harmful gender norms. It could also be helpful to interview advocacy groups that work directly with youth to understand their everyday lived experiences of gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

Sexuality education stands in a tug-of-war against the cultural and moral ethos of India (Das, 2014; Gabler, 2012; Malik, 2022). Public discussion of topics of a sexual nature is widely considered taboo. This acts as a barrier to the implementation of effective sexuality education in schools nationwide. The significance of sexuality education is crucial in conservative societies where traditional norms and attitudes perpetuate gender hierarchies and power dynamics (Nieder et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2021). By contextualizing the official content of the national Adolescent Education Programme (AEP) in terms of gender and sexuality, the curriculum can be made more robust and concrete. This would help in dismantling and deconstructing problematic issues, such as patriarchy and gender hierarchies, that have plagued Indian society for centuries (Bhallamudi, 2022; Maity, 2022; Nieder et al., 2019). There also needs to be a serious effort to include queer and transgender identities on an equal footing with heteronormative identities (Ahuja et al., 2019; Pufahl et al., 2021; Srivastava et al., 2023). This curriculum can be further strengthened by evolving a critical perspective. This will allow young people

to examine notions of inequality, exploitation, oppression, and domination through reflective discussions and debates surrounding gender and sexuality in a highly heteropatriarchal Indian socio-cultural environment.

In this qualitative research study, I borrowed from feminist social theory, queer theory, and critical pedagogy as frames or ‘lenses’ and combined thematic analysis (TA) with critical discourse analysis (CDA). Through these lenses and approaches, I uncovered how societal power relations are established and reinforced with implicit and explicit messages embedded in gendered discourses in the AEP curriculum. TA provided accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the data was explored for relevant themes and subthemes, an exploration of the connections between and among various themes was established. Usually, the needs of women and LGBTQ+ communities are ignored in India, and this study aims to disrupt the systems that exclude their representation and voices. By exposing discursive patterns of patriarchal gender ideology and heteronormativity in the curriculum, this study demonstrates how the reproduction of dominant discourses reinforces the status quo that subjugates communities. Sexuality education policymakers, such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), can interrogate how institutional power produces and disseminates dominant discourses by adopting a reflective stance. Such discourses inhibit the development of a more inclusive and equitable educational and social system for all.

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