



The Humanities and the Social Sciences in Indian Universities

Dr Kapil Kapoor

THE DISCIPLINARY FORMATIONS initially borrowed from Great Britain in the nineteenth century continue to be the bases of the faculties in Indian universities. In the second half of the twentieth century, with the US becoming the dominant power after World War II, we saw the addition, under growing American influence, of some new disciplines such as language teaching, linguistics, and psychology—subjects that had broken away from their parent disciplines: literature, philology, and philosophy. The following basic disciplinary formations, however, remained unchanged: i) faculty of the arts / humanities, ii) faculty of the social sciences, and iii) faculty of science. These were later followed by the faculty of engineering, and the faculty of medicine.

While the faculty of science has been growing and developing any number of new disciplines—electronics, astrophysics, information technology, space technology, missile technology, and many more—the humanities and the social sciences have been stagnating, even deteriorating. Religious studies, for example, have long been introduced in British universities, but continue to be absent in India, which is a pity, as religion is the largest social formation in every society. With the social sciences and the humanities becoming more and more peripheral in India, as elsewhere, their contribution is turning to be less affirmative and more conflict-promotion oriented. This is so because the social sciences and the humanities as taught in India are not rooted in her local cultures, and theoretical frames that are used to study them are borrowed

from cultures that have looked upon progress as a product of conflict.

The Social Sciences Revisited

Today the disciplines counted as the social sciences include, among others, the following: anthropology, geology, geography, psychology, sociology, history, education, social medicine and community health, political science, commerce, and management. The designation ‘social sciences’ is very suggestive; it i) acknowledges the Anglo-American opposition between ‘science’ and ‘arts’; ii) denies the possibility of, say, a science of painting or music; iii) invests ‘science’, ‘scientific knowledge’, and its methodology with a prestige that, by implication, degrades the humanities and the arts. The ‘social sciences’ has also become a ‘holdall’ term comprising disciplines that, in some other taxonomies, would belong to different categories or may not constitute independent subjects of study at all or which, as they develop, ‘overflow’ into allied areas. In a lighter vein, of course, it makes other academic pursuits, such as that of literature, anti-social!

All this is true of the humanities as well; they are perceived as disciplines farthest from ‘science’ and therefore least rational and, in the rampant utilitarian view, least useful for ‘struggling, suffering people’. And some disciplines have been moving out of the domain of the humanities and emerging as semi-respectable social science—semi-respectable because it is still not ‘science’.

There is such a close interrelation between disciplines like commerce and economics, political

science and sociology, psychology and education, and others that it is not possible to study them as autonomous subjects. This awareness has been growing of late, and at present interdisciplinary studies have become an overriding academic principle and practice.

It is easy to see that the social sciences in India are losing their definition, their connectivity with the felt needs of society. New areas of study having more connectivity with the immediate society are emerging—actually, they continue to operate under the old rubrics but have only tenuous bases in the ‘old’ disciplines. Such emerging ‘social sciences’ for Indian realities include women as knowledge and energy resource, integrated water-land-dairy management, microfinance, integrated energy resource management, organic farming and marketing, development paradigms and ecology, urbanization, population, mechanization and employment, and women cooperatives management.

These emerging areas of study are multidisciplinary and outside the given strict definitions of the social sciences. Till now, these were being taken up by non-university, non-governmental sectors, but are beginning to be incorporated in the disciplines of management, commerce, and social work—this being a relatively new social science having a strong nexus with the emerging areas of work and study. That the social sciences have to now deal with these apparently idiosyncratic areas becomes clear when we randomly review, for example, themes taken up in the last five years by important research journals such as the *Journal of Social Science Research* and the *E-Journal of Social Science*: India’s ecological heritage, India’s tribal heritage, global financial crisis and its impact on India, metaphysics and the challenge of logical positivism, female migration and urban informal sector, alternative development paradigm for Africa, geoinformatics in agricultural development, management of the democratization process, sibling relationship, educating adolescent girls and young women on family life issues, juvenile delinquency, barriers to educational development of scheduled caste students, social implications of

electronic commerce, health awareness of rural adolescent girls, work participation among the disabled in India, parenting in single parent and intact families, public administration paradigm shift, involvement of women in direct selling enterprises, single mothers, childlessness, team leadership and team commitment, contemporary women artists, banking finance and macroeconomics, representation of women in urban government, memory and locality, history of emotions, demography and economy of tribals in Jharkhand, ideas of the city, economic history, modern historiography.

The following e-journal themes further reinforce the pattern of diverse heterogeneous issues that cut across disciplinary boundaries: agricultural commodities, agriculture, China: explorations and analyses, ethics in the social sciences, focus on SAARC countries, infant and child health, infant and child mortality in India, international trade, microfinance: research roundup, public finance, rivers, dams and people, school education, urban development and displacement, urban world: bridging the urban divide, women and health.

These subjects do not figure in routine sociology, economics, commerce, psychology, or history courses. One clear conclusion that we may draw is that the issues of the classical social sciences have little, if anything, to do with the societal dynamics of present-day India. This is also true of the current university education as a whole, and it is this disjunction that is turning Indian universities into islands of doubly alienated people—alienated from their intellectual traditions and from their social and natural environment.

The Neglected Humanities

The humanities, however, retain their definition; the arts are closely allied, if not actually belonging to the same domain, and that is the humanities’ strength: the idea of beauty, a certain symmetry or justice, permeating all its discourses, whatever the field—philosophy, aesthetics, literature, music, or painting. From the beginning, from Plato in the West and the much older Upanishads in India,

one stream of human inquiry has delved into the mind and the heart: thoughts and emotions. This object of knowledge is perennial, because while the structure of a mechanism or society can change and evolve, the structure of the human being per se has remained virtually unchanged. Thus, the social sciences have been changing along with changing social forms and ways, as has been technology in general, but not the physical sciences—the latter can grow in their fund of knowledge, but are not essentially redefined, because their object of study, the physical reality, is constant.

But in the livelihood-oriented, empirically driven, utilitarian world of today's India, the humanities are the last options for aspiring university entrants—the best minds seem to go to commerce, and takers of philosophy are but a few. We can only bemoan with Goldsmith: 'Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey, / Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.'

The neglect of the humanities is dangerous for the human order. Prof. Sheldon Pollock, who has been appointed as general editor for the multimillion dollar humanities project of Indian classics at Harvard University, endowed by Infosys magnate Narayana Murthy, justifies this huge endowment for something other than poverty and disease alleviation in a recent interview: 'Without "the humanities", how human are we? What would it mean to win the world and lose one's soul?'¹

Under the term 'the humanities,' we count philosophy, literature, languages, aesthetics, music, drama, dance and folk arts, and other performances. In Indian universities, in the study of these disciplines too there is a disjunction between the actual life of people and the academics. Thus, for example, the School of Arts and Aesthetics in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) has little room or time for Indian arts or performances, except as saleable packaged commodities for Western audiences. Besides, Indian theories are conspicuous by their absence—just look at the courses and the readings, prescribed or advised, for those courses and you are in the familiar Indian academic ambience of

young minds being brought up on a special 'imported' diet, receiving learning with nothing to give in return.

In English literature departments all over the country the goals and methods in language teaching have been redefined with amazing rapidity to keep up with the changing fashions in 'theory': limited learning and limited ability in the languages are accepted as legitimate goals; the formulation that language is a 'habit' threw out grammar, adopted mechanical drill and pattern-practice, and ended up training people to wag their tongues without using their minds! This acceptance of foreign methodologies has percolated into the study of Indian languages as well; no surprise therefore that 'it is a truth universally acknowledged' that standards of language learning have fallen abysmally, and are still falling.

In literary studies we have witnessed two developments:

(i) A loss of autonomy in the new post-independence euphoria of 'development' and 'reform', in which literature has become a handmaiden of the social sciences and literary texts have been reduced to the status of 'documents' for one or the other thesis of the social 'scientists'.

(ii) As a consequence of the loss of autonomy, literary texts came to be increasingly read in a consumerist manner; texts are no more read for the reading experience but are fished for 'incriminating' material. This is demanded by the sociological or historicist readings of literature, where texts are not 'read' so much as 'talked about', theorized. The result is that at present we talk about the texts rather than absorb them for what they are. 'Theory' is at the centre of literature syllabi now, and the theory 'done'—that is the right verb—in India is the hegemonic Anglo-American, more American than Anglo, theory that has served as an instrument of the missionary politics of globalization, a euphemism for financial evangelism.²

The immediate outcome of these tendencies is the lack of clarity about what an English department in India should be doing at a time when the

humanities in particular are being made increasingly irrelevant and education is becoming 'vocalized'. Secondly, all research gets clustered round a few 'popular'³ borrowed theoretical frames or theories, reducing their range and limiting their freshness, as well as putting a question mark on their relevance.

One must examine the role and impact of borrowed theories both in language teaching and in literature. English language teaching theories have promoted business; with every new theory, a new technology—from spool recorders to CDs, besides several intermediate products—and a new package of teaching materials become saleable periodically every three or four years. Universities have laboratories that are also scrapyards for expensive unutilized or underutilized equipment and their libraries are full of language course books that have been rarely, if at all, used. But it has always been good business. In the process, language learning got de-linked from thinking, as language now came to be defined not as cognition but as communication—a means of transferring information rather than a mode of communion.

In literature 'theory' has had an equally deleterious effect. As we had noted elsewhere,⁴ American theories ranging from the structuralist to the post-modern—essentially metropolitan, ethnographic, and supremacist—have promoted divisiveness in Indian society and reduced Indian reality to the status of mere data. All such theories, with their embedded drivers of 'origins' and 'evolution', are structured as conflict models.⁵ Their ethnographic parameter of 'difference', perhaps necessary to break through the straitjacket of uncompromising Hebraic monotheism, is counterproductive in a pluralistic and pluri-theistic Indian society, which needs for its harmonious existence synthesizing universalism rather than *bheda buddhi*, discriminatory intellect—a kind of intellect that has always been considered in the Indian intellectual tradition to be of a lower form, one produced by *avidya*, ignorance.

Therefore, when we uncritically adopt Western theories, we are unwittingly undercutting India's

unity as well as alienating ourselves from our own thought. We must evaluate the impact of these theories on Indian society, reflect on the real felt needs of our people, and ponder whether these needs are actually being served or thwarted by these divisive, difference-oriented, 'evolutionary', apparently reformist, and certainly supremacist theories.

Acculturation of the Educational System

As part of the mainstream educational system both the humanities and the social sciences suffer from the known disabilities of the system, Anglo-American centrism being the most obvious and disabling constraint. That there is something fundamentally wrong with the Indian educational system was noted by Ananda Coomaraswamy in the thirties and even earlier by Max Müller. In *What India Can Teach Us* Müller said that Hindu intellectuals are always at pains to be dismissive about and to distance themselves from their own learning and intellectual tradition. Coomaraswamy, in his *Dance of Shiva*, refers to 'educated Indians' with the following footnote: 'That is how the victims of Indian education are described.' In the mainstream educational system of India all knowledge is presented as coming from the West, implying that India never produced any worthwhile knowledge. This education has little to do with the environment or with the cultural and intellectual traditions of India. India has often been rightly described as primarily agricultural, *krishi-pradhana*, and rural, but the subject matter of the social sciences in India is based on an urban vision—its discussions and assumptions are those of a self-seeking urban society—and has very little to do with the rural way of life. With its imperative of 'modernization', this education promotes a materialistic and an atheistic way of life in what was always been recognized as a morally-oriented, *dharma-pradhana*, society.

To achieve the goals of this non-indigenous educational system the Indian intellectual traditions of learning and thought are excluded and marginalized, producing thus generations of young Indian victims of cultural anomie or schizophrenia,



who have contempt for things Indian and admire the ‘success’—whatever that may be—of Western civilization; youth that value freedom above self-regulation, indulgence over restraint, and rights rather than duties.

This intellectual subordination of the Indian academy to the Western by establishing a recipient-donor, data-theory relationship is facilitated and strengthened by the complete exclusion of Indian knowledge systems from mainstream syllabi. The humanities and the social sciences are no exception. Examine the reading lists given nowadays by teachers in any of the disciplines listed above: all references and readings are from the West, primarily from the US. This trend was established in the sixties when, following the PL-480 food exchange agreement, a large sum of money became available to the US for funding higher education in India. This and the Ford Foundation grants enabled gifts of American books to Indian university libraries. Moreover, thousands of young ambitious Indian postgraduates were sent to the US, under the Fulbright programme, to work for their doctorates. The flood started returning in the late sixties, and all

those young fellows were directly appointed—such was the prestige of the American degree then—as readers, which is the second level in the three-tier hierarchy of university teachers in India, and many of them came to head different departments. Those ‘returned natives’ promulgated American theory and methodology and also deferred indefinitely the incorporation of Indian thought in the syllabi.

In linguistics, for example, it was ‘phoneme’ and ‘morpheme’ all the way—no room even for Panini, whose ‘transformational’ credentials had been acknowledged by most eminent Western linguists such as Chomsky, Bloomfield, Firth, and Sweet. It was only in 1978 that the present writer introduced the first course in Indian linguistics in the JNU, but such courses are still only exceptions. Take any discipline—be it philosophy, history, geography, or sociology—and you will find that strong Indian textual traditions are completely out of their syllabi. In philosophy there may be one paper out of eight that has a comparative slant and allows ‘Atman’ to be compared with ‘soul’! In geography there is no room for authentic Puranic or Rig Vedic geography, nor for the geography of the Mahabharata or,

more surprisingly, the geography recorded in such texts as the eighth-century *Kavyamimamsa* of Raja-shekhara, the court poet of Kannauj. In sociology, a discipline apparently devoted to understanding the complex Indian society, there is no room for the long sociological textual tradition of *dharmasutras*, *dharmashastras*, and *nibandhas*. Kautilya and the whole tradition of *nitishastra* have no place in either polity or economy or commerce. There is a two-thousand-year-old continuous cumulative textual tradition in Indian poetics and aesthetics, but the university reading lists painstakingly exclude all Indian thinkers and texts, forgetting that the contemporary ‘theory’ is a product of the acknowledged ‘linguistic turn’ brought about by Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralism, who was in fact a professor of Sanskrit in Geneva and was so deeply influenced by Indian thought that, in tune with the Indian philosophy of language, refuted the traditional long-held Western view that language is a representational system, arguing à la Bhartrihari that language is a constructivist system.

This brings us to the methodology of research in the humanities and the social sciences—the empirical sampling method and ethnography. Indian philosophy of knowledge allows space both to empirical and transcendental epistemologies, including, for example, intuition and direct apperception, which has been called ‘the yogi’s truth’. While accepting reason as an important epistemological category, the Indian mind has not privileged it above all other means of knowledge, such as *shabda pramana*, verbal testimony, and *anubhava*, experience.

The exclusive use of the empirical methodology has hindered a proper understanding of the Indian reality and often distorted the full truth. Indian society had, over the thousands of years of its existence, successfully transcended its multilingual and multi-ethnic reality and welded itself into a cultural polity, transforming itself from a geographic entity, *jambudvipa bharatakhanda*, to a cultural unity, *nashtra*. Once they experienced multiplicity as a consequence of the immigration that followed the end of colonies, Western thinkers foregrounded

ethnicity as the overriding parameter of identity and made it their primary research principle. All of the Ford Foundation funded researchers in the social sciences, both American and Indian, took to ethnographic studies in a big way to produce what I call *tanni-tirtham*,⁶ research to establish what is in fact a motivated political statement that India is not a ‘nation’ and that her major challenge is ‘justice’ for the non-mainstream—though the ‘mainstream’ itself has been questioned and fragmented—the religious or linguistic ethnic minorities. This research therefore is dangerously divisive, as perhaps it was intended to be, and India now is just a conglomerate of communities who by some peculiar logic are all ‘victims’.


The attitude of ignoring the vast Indian textual traditions in philosophy, history, polity, commerce, management, and other disciplines has its basis in the absence of such long, attested, continuous, and cumulative textual traditions in the West and in the consequent reliance of Western scholars on literary documents for their historical, social, and cultural research. But this use of literature as a document is not necessitated in the Indian tradition, as it has attested textual traditions, originating from proper disciplinary sources, in most major disciplines. It is unfortunate that the absence of this kind of continuous cumulative traditions in the West is the reason why Indian knowledge systems have been ignored in all of India’s educational programmes, not just the social sciences. Almost everything in the Indian tradition challenges the monistic underpinnings of Western thought.⁷ The consequence is an invalid academic exercise and the subversion of Indian thought in the humanities and social sciences departments of Indian universities.

The Solution

What is the solution? It is obvious and stares us in the face: Indian textual traditions of thought should be relocated in the syllabi of Indian universities. But this will not happen, as it has not happened, in the government-controlled mainstream educational system because of what appears to be

a well-considered policy to keep the successive generations ignorant of their roots and heritage of thought so that, ashamed of the intellectual poverty of their culture, they never assert an Indian identity, remain servile to the so-called modernity, and are convincingly driven to keep in perpetual power the class that is perceived by them as the guardian of this modernity, a bulwark against their own 'backward', 'obscurantist', 'non-modern', 'anti-rational' culture. This formula has worked, as Macaulay had predicted in 1836 it will: 'The effect of this [English] education on the Hindoos is prodigious. No Hindoo, who has received this education, ever remains sincerely attached to his religion. It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolater among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence.'⁸

Is everything lost then? Perhaps no. The solution lies in the breaking of this monolithic mainstream government-controlled educational system. This will happen through the dynamics of burgeoning numbers of aspirants to higher education, so many that the system will not be able to accommodate or handle them. To manage this situation, private universities and colleges free of the straitjacket

of the ruling educational policy will come into being—have already come into being—and these institutions shall be flexible and open-minded, as experience has already shown. In this context, even foreign universities that are on the anvil are to be welcomed, as they will naturally be more curious about and interested in the Indian intellectual traditions. We will have then not one product, not one body of students, but three products and three producers. The hope lies here. 

Notes and References

1. Sugata Srinivasaraju, 'Digital Memory', *Outlook*, 10 May 2010.
2. Are the metaphors getting mixed?
3. There may be different and interesting reasons for the 'popularity' of particular theories. The current favourites are nation construction, gender studies (feminism), post-colonialism, and the plight of women in Indian—particularly Hindu—society.
4. See 'English Studies in India' in *English Studies: Indian Perspectives*, ed. Makarand Paranjape (Delhi: Mantra, 2005).
5. In the middle ages it was God against man—God was the adversary. In the Renaissance nature became the adversary. In the Enlightenment religion or belief was the adversary, of reason. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during industrialization, man became the adversary of man—class war. And now it is woman against man—feminism.
6. *Tanni* and *tirtham*, both Tamil words, mean 'water'. Typically, in socio-linguistic research the two words will be tagged with caste markers: non-brahmanas call 'water' *tanni*, while brahmanas use the word *tirtham*. In this mode, ethnographic research in social sciences establishes difference, *bheda*, and fragments Indian society on the basis of caste, religion, income, profession, gender, and the like, and fails to account how internally diverse systems such as a village or a town or a community, or even the whole society, function as a harmonious whole.
7. See the forthcoming essay 'Concept and Taxonomy of Knowledge' in the series *History of Science, Culture and Civilization*, ed. D P Chattopadhyaya (Delhi: Oxford).
8. A letter written by Lord Macaulay from Calcutta on 12 October 1836 to his father Mr Zachary Macaulay; George Otto Trevelyan, *Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (Echo, 2006), 276.

