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Decolonising Knowledge: Reclaiming the Indian Knowledge System

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, one civilization had been allowed to decide what constitutes “knowledge”. Everything outside its frame was quietly filed away as belief, custom, or superstition. This unipolar viewpoint systematically pushed non-dominant civilizational paradigms into obscurity, entrenching deep cognitive hierarchies. This paper asks how such a claim came to feel natural in the first place, and what it cost the traditions it pushed aside. By studying and analysing Indian Knowledge System, it has been traced how an entire intellectual inheritance was not simply forgotten but actively unmade, and how that unmaking left its mark on the way people came to see their own past. Instead of focusing on the conventional schools of thought, this paper questioning not just the design of historical narratives, but the transformative potential unlocked when diverse civilizational traditions are fully acknowledged.

KEYWORDS

Indian Knowledge System, Eurocentric Hegemony, Coloniality of Power, Orientalism, Macaulay’s Minute, Arthashastra, Saptanga Theory, Mandala Theory

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Introduction

Every civilization has its own way of liberating knowledge. But there are clash of opinions on what is knowledge and who has the right definition of knowledge. For over two centuries, the term ‘knowledge’ has been defined as the opposition to belief, faith, customs or superstitions and set to be believed in institutions and philosophies which are rooted by Western Europe. For centuries, the notion of knowledge has been made us to believe that the idea of knowledge was derived by Europe. No alternate notion of knowledge or ideas were considered and at the gunpoint, the Western notions were implemented in a draconian way. From Enlightenment rationalism to the modern research university — represents not one route to knowledge among several, but the only route, the standard which all others

are to be judged and, typically, found wanting. In this way, the idea of knowledge is considered to be vested in the hands of Europe.

Modern academic and intellectual frameworks have operated under a silent premise: that genuine rational inquiry, scientific rigor, and universal humanism originated exclusively in the Greco-Roman world and the European Enlightenment. This Eurocentric monopoly on “reason” relegated other civilizational epistemologies to folklore, mysticism, or pre-modern relics. This is a structured way of manipulation and brainwashing the ideas and institutions of the others. Therefore, it becomes necessary to take stand against the “intellectual hegemony” of Europe and present a proper counter argument making it clear that the other

civilizations also have ideas, values and contributed to knowledge. The resurgence of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers a necessary corrective to this intellectual hegemony, presenting a pluralistic, ecologically grounded, and rigorous counter-narrative to colonial epistemic dominance.

The systematic destruction, marginalization, and subjugation of indigenous knowledge systems under colonial expansion constitutes what Santos terms epistemicide—the murder of indigenous knowledges.[1] The colonial encounter in India was not solely an enterprise of resource extraction, military subjugation, and geopolitical domination; it was deeply driven by cognitive subjugation.

The Architecture of Epistemic Hegemony:-

The marginalization of indigenous Indian intellectual traditions was not accidental. It was the foundational project of British colonial rule. In his infamous 1835 Minute on Indian Education, Thomas Babington Macaulay declared:

“A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”[2]

This statement alone clears the cruel idea of dismantling the beliefs and values enshrined in the indigenous Indian intellectual traditions. This became the foundational stone of distortion of Indian intellect and knowledge system. This dismissal exemplifies what Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos characterizes as epistemicide—the systematic destruction and delegitimization of non-Western ways of knowing.[1]

During the colonial rule, their principle motive was to universalise their own local values and ideals and neglect the non-Western political thought by calling their tradition as barbarous. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty observes in *Provincializing Europe* (2000), European thought remains both “indispensable and inadequate”[3] for understanding the postcolonial world. The Indian knowledge system serves as an epistemological intervention to break this one-way flow of theory from the Global North to the South. This provides an alternate perspective to understand what knowledge is.

Unlike the Eurocentric intellectual tradition which is

largely rooted in the idea of the knower, the Indian intellectual tradition is rooted in the conception of the listener. Such a conception of the listener is at the bottom of the idea of the political in India and it has been largely mediated and transmitted across generations, through pedagogical techniques. This kind of a focus on the listener that is disseminated through pedagogical techniques is distinct from the Eurocentric accentuation upon the phenomenon of epistemology and the knower.

Plural Validations:-

While the European modernity entrenched strict binaries—mind versus body, observer versus observed, faith versus reason, the classical Indian intellectual traditions developed sophisticated systems of formal logic and epistemology. To critically examine IKS as a counter-narrative, we must establish the theoretical tools developed by decolonial, postcolonial, and subaltern studies over the past half-century.

The Coloniality of Power:-

Renowned sociologist Aníbal Quijano formulated the concept of the “coloniality of power”[4], demonstrating that while historical administrative colonialism has largely formally ended, the underlying structures of racialization, economic exploitation, and cognitive hierarchy established by Euro-American hegemony remain fully intact.

Based on the writings of Quijano, Argentine philosopher Walter D. Mignolo distinguishes between colonialism (the historical administrative presence of an empire) and coloniality (the enduring logical structure of domination). Mignolo highlights the coloniality of knowledge, asserting that the modern global university and international scientific regimes function via the “hubris of the zero point”[5]. This zero point is the imaginary epistemological position of a Western observer who:

“observes without being observed, delineates what is real without disclosing their own historical and geopolitical situatedness, and speaks a universal language from an unsituated nowhere”. [5]

This conception meant that the Eurocentric knowledge was objective, rational, neutral and universal. While on the other hand, they embedded that the other knowledge bases

were superstitious, local, and local and had no universal applicability.

Orientalism:-

Perhaps the most cruel type of distortion was done by orientalists. Edward Said's landmark critique in *Orientalism* (1978) exposed how Western institutions, literatures, and political bodies systematically produced the "Orient" as an exotic, irrational, feminine, stagnant, and inherently mystical counter-image to the rational, masculine, dynamic, and enlightened "Occident." [6]

In the context of the Indian subcontinent, Orientalism functioned via a double movement. Their dual nature was exposed and can be seen as the systematic way of manipulation of thoughts over the generations.

1. **Utilitarian / Evangelical Denigration:** Thinkers like James Mill in *The History of British India* (1817) [7] and Thomas Babington Macaulay characterized Indian thought as debased, unscientific, and fundamentally corrupt. Macaulay famously quotes:-

"form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect"

This clearly shows the evil intentions of these Evangelical thinkers to brainwash the minds of Indian in order to impose their opinions on us.

2. **Essentialist Mystification:** Indologists like Max Müller [8], while translating and engaging classical Sanskrit texts, constructed a vision of India that was exclusively other-worldly, spiritual, and detached from material reality, practical science, statecraft, and formal logic. Both moves successfully erased India's rigorous traditions of empirical science, mathematical innovation, critical debate, and secular analytical philosophy from global intellectual history. This was a rigorous attempt to make sure that the intellectual ability of a person should not form and a preconceived notion should flourish in the minds of the people. By using these kinds of draconian strategies, they

successfully eradicated the scientific temper and critical ability of the whole subcontinent.

If a person has been taught since early days of his/her life, then that particular notion will be stuck into the minds of the person ending up questioning their own civilization and knowledge system. The displacement of the Indian Knowledge System was an intentional policy designed to produce a compliant administrative class alienated from its own civilizational foundations.

Macaulay's Minute:-

The 1835 Macaulay's Minute was the foundational document in marginalization of the indigenous thought and knowledge bases. It remains as a pioneer colonial educational engineering in India.

Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education, delivered to the Council of India in February 1835. Macaulay, with unvarnished imperial hubris, wrote:

"I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value... I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay, 1835). [2]

This was far from being a neutral educational transformation. Rather, it disrupted the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge in fields such as mathematics, philosophy, technical learning, and ecology. By making employment opportunities, administrative advancement, and social status increasingly dependent on English-language education based on Western curricular models, the colonial state weakened indigenous educational institutions through reduced financial support, systematic neglect, and institutional marginalisation. This selective framing led to the systematic erasure of India's extensive traditions of secular, empirical, and analytical sciences.

But this systematic rupture of educational sector was termed as evolution and the English language was forced to everyone. But there is a important question that does knowing English language or studying in English medium will make you competent?

This question must be answered with proper description and analysis. At this moment, the real colonial rule begins resulting in not only loot, plunder of socio-economic resources of the nation but it also shook the base and foundations on which the Indian knowledge system was based.

Indian Knowledge System as an Alternative Epistemology :-

Pointing out on the nature and objectives of the colonial education does not mean that the intention is to establish a hegemony of Indocentric notion against the Eurocentric notion. Indian Knowledge Systems provide a counter to the Eurocentric monopoly over knowledge.

At its core, the Indian knowledge system focusses on the systematic study of knowledge, its nature, validity, and acquisition (Pramāṇa Śāstra). The detailed analysis of disciplines, philosophies of Indian intellectual traditions will show the epistemological differences between both the knowledge bases.

While mainstream Western epistemology long prioritized a binary logic bounded by the law of the excluded middle. The classical Indian schools developed sophisticated frameworks for processing nuance, context, and multi-valued truth.

Indian intellectual traditions is neither based on any binary logic not based on any single book which closes the voice of any other alternative view.

By offering alternatives to binary, zero-sum logical paradigms, these non-Western epistemologies anticipate contemporary debates in quantum mechanics, dialetheism, paraconsistent logic, and complex systems theory.

Reclaiming Scientific and Mathematical Lineages:-

Mathematics and science are those disciplines which are meant to be the most logical involving critical skills to understand. Therefore, it was obvious that the Europeans would also target the sciences in order to ensure their hegemony. The Eurocentric historiography provides a developmental narrative of modern day science: Greece to Rome to Renaissance to Enlightenment to Modernity. In this regard, non-Western civilizations were considered to have a passive role in the development of modern science.

A critical examination of the Indian Knowledge System shatters this narrative, revealing deep foundations of scientific inquiry, empirical testing, and mathematical invention.

Mathematics:-

The Indian contribution to the mathematical sciences was not peripheral; it transformed the field's fundamental architecture. George Gheverghese Joseph, in his seminal work *The Crest of the Peacock: Non-European Roots of Mathematics* (2011), methodically deconstructs the Eurocentric baseline of mathematical history:

“The standard history of mathematics is Eurocentric in its approach and biased in its conclusions. It traces the origin of mathematics to Greece, accepts that some basic arithmetic and geometry may have been known to the Egyptians and Babylonians, skips the Dark Ages... and then moves directly to the European Renaissance.” [9]

India has produced mathematicians like Aryabhata, Brahmagupta and Madhava who played their important roles in the development of the discipline. The creation of the decimal place-value system with base 10, the concept of Zero does not only play important role in Indian traditions but it also revolutionised the modern day computation. In the Western world, Greek geometry struggled with the arithmetic of large numbers and zero because of an ontological aversion to “nothingness” rooted in Parmenidean philosophy.

In India, influenced by Buddhist and Vedantic conceptions of Śūnyatā (the productive void/emptiness) and Pūrṇa (the infinite fullness), zero was conceived not merely as a positional empty placeholder, but as a formal number in its own right with operational rules.

Scholars such as C.K. Raju (*Cultural Foundations of Mathematics*, 2007) have argued, through historical and maritime evidence, that these mathematical techniques were transmitted to Europe via Jesuit missionaries based in Cochin who sent translations of astronomical and calendar-reform data back to Rome and European scholars.[10]

Linguistic and Grammar:-

Around the 4th-6th century BCE, the grammarian Pāṇini composed the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*[11]—a formal system of roughly

4,000 algorithmic rules. Therefore, the Indian tradition is widely recognised as the earliest generative grammar in human history.

Medicine and Surgery:-

The Indian traditions witness flourishing discipline of medicine and surgery way before the Europeans. One of the primary example is Ayurveda. The classical Indian medical systems (Āyurveda, as codified in the Caraka Saṃhitā[12], Suśruta Saṃhitā[13] , and Aṣṭāṅga Hṛdaya) approached human biology through an integrated, dynamic systems paradigm.

Susruta Samhita is the pioneer text in the field of medicine and surgery which provides details about the tools, equipments and other instruments required for surgery. The text details over 300 surgical procedures, 120 surgical instruments. It has also provided techniques for cataract extraction, and the foundational principles of plastic and reconstructive surgery.

Political Philosophy:-

Certainly the most significant aspect of the Indian intellectual tradition was its philosophy. Philosophy in Indian traditions plays a crucial and dynamic role. It was one of the most important subject which was taught in every school or gurukul of that period.

Though many believes that political philosophy is the Western concept. They neglect the contributions of Indian thinkers and philosophers like Kautilya, Shukra and others. Indian philosophy does not only portrayed idealism but it had ample space for statecraft, realism and other aspects which are relevant today. In this regard, we have a significant example of Arthashastra which acted as the foundational text in the discipline of political philosophy. The Arthashastra [14] by Kautilya does not only provide rules but also gives us some concrete concepts like realism which seems to be relevant today as well.

But the misery is that Kautilya is known as the Machiavelli of the East because of his realist ideas regarding the statecraft. But the reality is that Arthashastra provided the concept centuries before Machiavelli was even born.

Kautilyan theories such as Saptanga Theory and Mandal Theory deals with modern state order and foreign policy. These theories have relevance today as well.

The concept of Mitra and Ari in the Mandal Theory provides the nature of the realist world way before the existence of the concept of realism. Kautilya formulated the Saptāṅga Theory of the state, viewing the polity not as the private property of a monarch, but as an organic system comprising seven interdependent organs:

Svāmī (The Ruler)

Amātya (Ministers/Bureaucracy)

Janapada (Territory and Population)

Durga (Fortified Capital/Infrastructure)

Kośa (Treasury)

Daṇḍa (Army/Enforcement)

Mitra (Allies)

All these constitute as important and formidable organs of the state.

In foreign policy, his Maṇḍala Theory provided a structural model of interstate relations and balance-of-power dynamics, anticipating the structural realism of modern international relations theory.

Conclusion:-

The Indian Knowledge System provides an epistemological, scientific, and ethical alternative to the universalized claims of Eurocentric modernity. For centuries, the colonial matrix of power worked to displace and delegitimize this intellectual heritage, substituting a mechanistic, dualistic, and extractivist paradigm for an interconnected, pluralistic, and systems-oriented worldview.

The contemporary relevance of the Indian Knowledge System does not rest on a desire to substitute a collapsing Eurocentric hegemony with an equally narrow Indocentric one. The replacement of one monoculture of the mind with another merely reproduces the imperial logic of domination. By bringing India's rich traditions of mathematics, linguistics, epistemology, systems medicine, statecraft, and ecological ethics into dialogue with global science and the humanities, we achieve several vital objectives. The reclamation of the Indian Knowledge System is not an exercise in historical nostalgia. It is a

critical project aimed at expanding the intellectual horizons of humanity.

By deconstructing the zero-point hubris of Eurocentric thought, engaging critically with internal socio-historical

hierarchies, and placing indigenous traditions into horizontal dialogue with other world philosophies, the Indian Knowledge System helps lay the groundwork for cognitive justice and an equitable global pluriverse.

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