

Colonised Epistemologies

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Some time back I received two questions in an email from an unknown group in Calcutta (Kolkotta). I believe that I was not the only recipient of the questions. The email appeared to be a general appeal to people for a response to the questions posed.

The questions were—

How far the hegemony of the Western epistemological categories is significant and perceptible in the knowledge processes of the East and to what extent these can be considered epistemological violence?

Considering the fact that the East and the West cannot remain pure and unadulterated, and that the colonized as well as post-colonized East is of a hybrid nature, can the subaltern East speak for itself and envisage its 'own modernity'?

Intrigued but not knowing what to say in response I saved these questions, though I think I deleted the mail. Therefore, I no longer know to whom I should send my response. I am therefore publishing it, in the hope that it will reach the persons who posed the questions.

Though pertinent, there is something wrong with these questions. On the face of it, it is obvious that these categories do affect our “knowledge processes”. In that sense the (first) question is unnecessary. Why then should it be asked? The only possible reason can be – to intellectualise it. In other words, the question as posed invites an answer in terms of the very categories that it questions. Such an answer can only serve these categories, not deconstruct them. In fact, it seems to me that the question, as posed, is a pointer to the cul de sac that “eastern” thought finds itself in.

The second part of the question, suggestive of a way out of this impasse, is actually confirmatory of the quagmire in which our thought processes are stuck. To suggest that this “violence” is inevitable, and ought not to become a barrier to the expression of the east’s “own modernity”, is to say- since there is no escape, is it not better for us to surrender and enjoy the rape. [I expect the reader to try and understand the reasons for the strong (violent) language.]

To come back to the main point, no people in history, not even the aborigines of the Andaman Islands and Australia, have actually remained “pure and unadulterated”. This category (and all its binaries) is also western and subject to questioning before being used. However, the binary here is not “pure and unadulterated” versus the “hybrid”. (Hybrid implying something that is not identifiable as any one or more of its constituent parts (or strains) but is something new, even as it is within the category of its constituent

parts.) The metaphorical east (actually the ‘rest of the world’) stands overwhelmed, in terms of epistemology and, the related science of pedagogy. It is, in fact, deemed not to have an epistemology (and, largely, a pedagogy) relevant to “modernity”. (In fact, one follows the other, without anything else intervening.) As such, the “east” stands permanently reduced to the category of the unlearned, unlettered, uncivilised child, eternally condemned to be “led” to school by the pedagogical west.

Detractors of this view would certainly point to the enormous amount of knowledge (and its categories) that the west has gained from the east. They may also refer to Edward Said and many others who have shown in graphic relief that enslavement is a two way relationship, no matter how hard the master may try to resist this. I think neither of these examples can stand in the way of my proposition.

The operative word in the first example is “gained”. Undoubtedly, the west has gained from its engagement with the “east”. This “gain” is what permits Said and others to propound their thesis. Without questioning Said, I would only wish to point out that whatever the west has gained has enriched western epistemology. On the other hand, there has been no “gain” to “eastern” epistemology from this exchange. On the contrary, as the west consolidates its hold (deeper, more pervasive), eastern epistemology is vanishing at an ever increasing rate.

Take an example. I have repeatedly come across educated Indians carping about the “pure” Hindi that newsreaders on Doordarshan, the Government of India’s television service, speak. They complain (and perhaps rightly so) that such difficult language puts people off. On the other hand, the very same Indians will not think twice about looking up the meaning of epistemology the first time they come across it, and then, using it, with pride. Why? Because, like Indian thought (and its categories and processes), Indian languages are in decline.

Take another example. Just yesterday a friend who is actually very “Indian” in many ways (but a complete brown sahib in many others) called to ask if I could suggest to him a Hindi equivalent of the word ‘mass’ (as in mass communication). With my limited vocabulary, I could only suggest *saamajic* (social). He dismissed it as inaccurate. He then said that the official equivalent, used on the board that he was reading from, was *saarvajanic* (public or, more accurately ‘for all people’). He rightly said that this too was an inaccurate translation and rang off saying that there was no equivalent for ‘mass’ in Hindi and, that this was a “shortcoming” of the language.

Marvelous example, even though I say so myself, of the point that I am making. Hindi is incapable of “expressing modernity” eastern or western. So, learn English, oblivious of the irony that the notion of the mass (somewhat distinct from ‘multitude’) – which the Shorter Oxford defines as “an aggregate in which individuality is lost” – arose in the individual centric west rather than the collective/ community centric east.

I will stop here. I think I have made my point and to say more would be to indulge in the very categories that I suggest should be repudiated. But the question remains. Is there any sense in opposing the hegemony of western epistemology? After all, what human

beings need is 'an epistemology'. How does it matter if that epistemology is western or eastern? Aren't these categories rather parochial and, hence, otiose, in an increasingly cosmopolitan, increasingly global world? Is it not likely that over time we eastern people, with our remarkably sharp minds (just look at how well "we" are doing in the west), will take over much of world thought, including epistemology?

In answer, I would ask the following questions. Is there any sense in opposing monoculture? Would you like to see Eucalyptus take over the Indian terrain? Would you like to have just one variety (the Monsanto one) of rice, wheat, etc grown on Indian farms? If not, then why would you like to have western epistemology as the only one available? Is it because you believe that other epistemologies are incapable of "expressing modernity"?

If the answer to the last question is yes, then I say that it is not epistemology that is the problem. The problem is the mind that has made "modernity" into a thing. Why? Is it because of the actual superiority of "modernity" over all other "ities"? Or, is it because of the trappings that we think accompany "modernity"? Trappings that we think we cannot do without. The electricity, the mobility, the connectivity, the individuality. In other words, the power that we partake of by virtue of our familiarity with western epistemology. The power that the west has "shared" with us, the handful of local elites in each "eastern" polity, in order to better hegemonise the vast mass of us.

To conclude, having implanted their epistemology in our hearts and souls, the west could choose to "decolonise", secure in the unlikelihood of our ever being able to escape their grip.