Thin Encounters with Knowledge

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IN 2001, a report of the Planning Commission coolly declared: ‘We missed the industrial revolution but we should not miss the information and knowledge revolution.’ 1 A report of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) admits: ‘We feel a sense of excitement at the potential that India has to emerge as one of the leading knowledge societies in the world.’ 2 These epic claims of self-uplift provide the running sub-text for the NKC reports.

A perfumed letter by the NKC Chairman, Sam Pitroda, states that the

NKC was formed in 2005 as ‘a high level advisory body’ to the Indian prime minister ‘to help restructure knowledge related institutions and infrastructure’ and prescribe changes ‘that would position India as a global knowledge player.’ 3 During its soon-to-terminate tenure, the NKC has made ‘over 200 recommendations’ in areas such as ‘Higher and Profes-

A glance at the NKC reports will reveal the gigantism of its recommendations: more colleges, more universities, more libraries, more PhD students. Whereas the NKC’s affirmation of the state’s responsibility towards achieving the goal of universal primary education embodied in the Right to Education Bill has been admired, its robust advocacy of an increased role for private capital in the education sector has invited sharp criticism. For instance, its recommendation that the state make land grants and offer financial assistance to private universities while abdicating its regulatory powers over their tuition and admission policies has even been characterized as ‘anti-public’. This essay will focus on a few of the conceptual presuppositions found in the NKC reports.

The NKC’s characterization of India as ‘a latecomer to development’ reveals a geo-temporal awareness rooted in the colonial understanding of India as being ‘backward’ on a unilinear scale of civilizational evolution. This mode of comparative self-awareness presumes that ‘developing’ countries have similar institutional arrangements which can be rearranged to arrive at conditions perceived to exist in ‘developed’ countries. Testifying to this style of thought, the NKC observes that the number of universities in India is insufficient ‘in comparison with China which has authorized the creation of 1250 new universities in the last three years.’ The China comparison does not tell us anything as to why a similar decision is in order here. In a dizzying act of abstraction, the institutional realities of the two countries are held to be similar, permitting one country’s decision to be a guide for the other.

Although the NKC does not define ‘knowledge’ in any of its numerous reports, its ‘terms of reference’ make it evident that it conceives of knowledge in mere instrumental terms as know-how and a commodifiable good. The NKC’s terms of reference are: ‘(i) to build an educational system to meet the knowledge challenges of the 21st century and increase India’s competitive advantage in fields of knowledge; (ii) promote creation of knowledge in Science and Technology laboratories; (iii) improve the management of institutions engaged in Intellectual Property Rights; (iv) promote knowledge applications in agriculture and industry; (v) promote the use of knowledge capabilities in making government an effective, transparent and accountable service provider to the citizen and promote widespread sharing of knowledge to maximize public benefit.’

It is precisely this reduced conception of knowledge that allows the NKC to assert that ‘the time has come for us to teach our people – ordinary people – English as a language in schools’, since it enables ‘access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities.’ Instrumental gain appears to be the sole justification for advocating English language learning. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the NKC prescribes a policy of ‘multilingualism’ only in relation to primary and secondary education, and not higher education.

The NKC’s insufficient attention to promoting intellectual work in regional languages shows its insensitivity to the issue of knowledge itself. As we know, languages embed a social, political and ethical imagination and are a source of creativity and life itself. In the context of India’s rich linguistic diversity, huge political controversies have arisen vis-à-vis the scripts to be chosen for languages and the forms of standardization necessary for administrative expedience. Socio-linguists have also written about the ‘vanishing’ linguistic diversity in the country. The NKC’s proposal for extending special state patronage to English at the expense of other languages is then profoundly short-sighted.

In this regard, the NKC’s caution following its argument for translates scientific texts into local languages is also illustrative: ‘One important factor which has to be kept in mind while translating into local languages is that the technical terms/scientific terms should be kept in English. This will make it
Although the NKC encourages the translation of literary works and textbooks in the social sciences in Indian languages, the nourishment of these languages does not appear to be the chief motivation behind its suggested policies on translation. The NKC’s first recommendation on the issue of translation itself is: ‘Provide impetus for developing translation as an industry in the country.’ Its estimate that the ‘entire translation industry’ can ‘employ between 200,000 and half a million people’ and its intention ‘to promote machine translation’ to enable ‘a rapid and large volume of translation at a relatively low cost’ reveal that the NKC is heavily led by considerations of economic gain for the country.

The NKC gives little attention to the social sciences, while management, engineering and legal education, i.e., what it considers to be ‘professional education’, find elaborate discussion in its reports. And, the humanities disciplines like philosophy and art do not even find a passing mention. This indifference is unfortunate.

The modern education system has successfully distanced generations of Indians from the rich archive of literary and philosophical texts of India. Apart from a superficial mention of high-classical texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Natyashastra and Buddhacharita, to name a few, school textbooks hardly make students aware of the variety of intellectual traditions in India and their contribution to the history of Indian thought. The issue of canon formation, of course, is always fraught with anxiety over the hazards of privileging a certain textual archive at the expense of others. However, a critical effort can be made towards devising as inclusive a canon as possible. The importance of such a task, which admittedly is not easy, cannot be overemphasized.

How have the varieties of humanistic traditions in India shaped political moralities? What are the conceptions of equality and justice that we can recover from Indian thinkers? How have they addressed the illegitimacy of cruelty and violence? How can Indian aestheticians help analyze visual practices in contemporary India? Research on basic sociological questions such as these is scarce. Besides the scholastic imperative, a critical social and intellectual history is also crucial for interpreting the living realities of our time.

The lament against the tyranny of western analytical categories is quite familiar in intellectual discussions in India. Attempts must now be made to overcome the problem. Leaving aside the task of building a theory of Indian culture, local conceptual reversals to capture the phenomena at hand can go a long way in evolving a satisfying vocabulary for interpreting our social realities. This task becomes more urgent with the dominance of western academic discourses on intellectual conversations in metropolitan centres in India. This is not a plea for intellectual insularity. It only points to the necessity of evolving a conceptual vocabulary that is in sync with our lived realities.

A separate report like the NKC’s ‘Attracting Talented Students to Maths and Science’, which gives detailed consideration to issues of pedagogic resource and teaching personnel to revamp the field of basic sciences in India, does not exist for the social sciences and humanities among its publications. The NKC’s preoccupation with encashable knowledge has made it indifferent to the possibilities of renewing intellectual conversations in India. At the very least, our schools and colleges have to strengthen students’ knowledge in an Indian language and acquaint them with Indian written and oral intellectual traditions. High quality liberal arts colleges and research institutes have to be founded for ‘attracting talented students’ to undertake studies and research work in philology, art, philosophy, literature and the social sciences. These initiatives could contribute towards the formation of a humanities and social sciences for Indian society.

It is not surprising that a diminished concept of the human being is at the heart of the NKC’s imagination of the people of India as a state resource. Phrases like ‘demographic dividend’ and ‘demographic advantage’, which attempt to convey the economic benefits of a large youth population and assimilate social thought within a business managerial attitude, surface occasionally in the NKC documents. ‘For India to enjoy the fruits of the demographic dividend’, the report observes, vocational education must be revamped.

16. Ibid.
17. 17. Its telegraphic proposal to set up a National Science and Social Science Foundation, ‘which will look at all knowledge as one seamless entity’, does not address the challenges or requirements of social science research in India in any detail. Report to the Nation 2006, op cit., p. 62.
of the early English mercantilist view of large populations as an advantage for a nationally organized economy, another NKC report states, ‘With 550 million people below the age of 25, our human capital is our greatest asset.’

India is seen to consist of individuals with only a useful economic role to perform in aid of India’s development.

The key problem is that the NKC brings only an economic calculus to considerations of knowledge, which impoverishes the ‘knowledge’ part of NKC’s policy proposals. The diverse forms of life (‘cultures’) that we see in India embed a multiplicity of knowledge schemas, i.e., dense conceptual thickets concerning selfhood, social ethics, aesthetic values and transcendental ends. The NKC recognition of the intimacy between knowledge and the social world soon gives way to a business-managerial attitude to it: ‘Traditional knowledge can be defined as knowledge which has a traditional link with a certain social group. Moreover, in a diverse range of areas, this knowledge is also crucial to the identity of communities in which it operates and is preserved. The appropriate application of this knowledge can enrich people’s lives and livelihoods, provide alternative means of sustenance and generate substantial employment.’

The NKC’s concerns with patenting both ‘traditional’ and innovative knowledges presume that the older and the newer knowledges can happily co-exist. There is non-recognition of the conflictual relationships among them. Since knowledge innovations can wipe out forms of life that survive on older technologies, they raise the question of state responsibility towards the refugees of technological ‘progress’ and their powers of sustaining the integrity of their cultural worlds.

The NKC is but a recent episode in the increasing state practice of creating ‘expert’ commissions to suggest public policy guidelines. These domains of deliberation are ostensibly outside politics as experts are presumed to offer only disinterested policy advice. The NKC reports list the names of its numerous consultants, many of whom are known for their sensitive views on language and education. Since the extent to which any consultant’s feedback mattered is mentioned nowhere, the NKC’s consultative process remains opaque. The process by which the NKC was assembled needs to be questioned. And, instead of accepting its recommendations as objective truths arrived at by disinterested experts, its normative commitments and policy preferences must be subject to open, democratic deliberation.

Recently, a European Union (EU) committee assigned to study the reasons for the European public’s unease with ‘innovation research’ has urged the EU to govern the pre-innovation research process itself. Instead of asking why the European public is anxious about technological innovations, they urge the creation of ‘institutional capacity’ to enable an open deliberation of ‘the imagined social purposes, needs, benefits and priorities that drive innovation research in the first place.’ This suggestion could be made to the NKC or, for that matter, any state-appointed expert committee on matters of public interest.

Over the last few decades, activists in social movements and academia in India have made compelling critiques of the simplified conceptions of knowledge involved in the state’s development-from-above strategies. The NKC should have engaged with them.

The preceding discussion is not to be construed as anti-planning anarchism. Few would deny the need for reform in our educational system. However, the NKC’s colossal reform imagination does not treat knowledges and the life-forms anchoring them seriously enough. Its skill-based orientation to the issue of knowledge overlooks the importance of epistemic self-awareness in creatively sustaining and transforming social institutions. The NKC reports provide an occasion to ask again, a hundred years after Gandhi did, ‘What is Hind Swaraj?’ How do we think of civilizational autonomy today?

On 20th March 2009, newspapers reported the NKC chairman’s unhappiness over the manner in which the government had appointed the vice-chancellors for fifteen new central universities. The government had set aside the NKC’s recommendation that autonomous search committees be formed for choosing vice-chancellors for universities. The NKC’s proposal found the going tough in the world of political power. The jagged realities of Indian democracy might also enable a creative editing of NKC’s pure technorational worldview.

22. Ibid.
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