

# The University as Utopia

## Critical Thinking and the Work of Social Transformation

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**ABSTRACT** This article addresses three interrelated themes: the institutional transformations of Indian universities since India's independence, debates in India over the assumed universality of Western modes of knowledge production and transmission, and the overarching philosophical question of knowledge as such. It argues that the question of power and prejudice acquires a different dimension when we consider the university of the Global South. If our struggle is to recover knowledges buried by history, to subvert existing knowledge formations, and to generate new knowledges out of local histories and practices, then we cannot be training ourselves merely to enter existing fields of settled knowledges that have emerged from the history and location of the Global North. The article concludes with a look at some attempts that have been made to decolonize knowledge in the Indian academy, which draw on resources from the Global South, while opening up both "Western" and "Indian" knowledges to interrogation.

**KEYWORDS** Global South, Hindu Right, non-Western knowledges, Jacques Rancière, pedagogy

The university is conceived of as utopia here, in the sense that it simultaneously embodies a promise and negates it. The modern university is a promise of a space for knowledge generation and transmission, for critical thought and reflection, for freedom of the mind. But the university also reproduces historical privilege, shores up settled bodies of knowledge, and trains young people to acknowledge authority and to occupy their place in society as it is. That the subversive promise survives despite its negation—this is what marks the university, more than any other modern institution, as a threat to the status quo.

There are two interrelated themes in this article. The first notes the tenacity of "the promise" in the public university system in India despite relentless attacks on it over the past decade from both neoliberal and Hindu right-wing fronts (these two strands partially overlap but are also distinct). The second interrelated theme is a more general one of "modern" knowledge and its "locatedness," which produces

debates over authenticity, translation (of both linguistic and conceptual universes), and rival pedagogical models. These debates have resulted in some creative modes of decolonizing knowledge. The intention of this article is to map the manner in which these debates play out in the arena of education, arguing, through the experience of India but also more generally of the Global South, that as we redo theory in unfamiliar ways and as theory undoes us, something happens to and in universities, those bureaucratic entities whose job is to produce well-schooled individuals for the world as it is. Despite themselves, universities generate moments of utopia through their explosive embodiment of youth and its disrespect for conventions, confronted by the challenges that access to knowledge produces.

### **The Indian University in the Late Twentieth to Early Twenty-First Centuries**

Universities across India have been at the forefront of militant resistance to the Hindutva project ever since the current regime under Narendra Modi came to power in 2014. Hindutva, or Hindu cultural nationalism, is a century-old project, at the heart of which is the organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (which translates literally to “National Volunteer Force,” but its initials RSS bear the charge of a form of fascism that has come to be called *sanghvaad* or Sanghism in India). In the words of V. D. Savarkar, Hindutva’s main progenitor, it is the project to Hinduize the nation and militarize Hinduism. On the face of it, this is a nationalist rather than a religious or theocratic characterization, for Savarkar defines as “Hindu” all those who live in the land where the river Sindhu (Indus) flows, but the definition of the nation is inextricably fused with the religious identity of “Hindu” because only those whose sacred land (*punyabhū*) is in the territory of “India” can be legitimately Indian. This brings into the fold Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs, but irrevocably excludes Muslims and Christians, whose originary places of worship lie elsewhere. Central to the project is the idea of *samrasta*, or homogeneity, that basically seeks to unite all “Hindus,” especially Dalits and other lower castes, under North Indian Hindu upper-caste hegemony.<sup>1</sup>

This is the ideology of the formation that now rules India. How do universities figure in this project?

An ideologue of contemporary Hindutva wrote recently: “Those who considered the RSS the enemy of ‘secularism and nationalism’ no longer hold state power. However, they still hold the dominant position in academia.”<sup>2</sup> This is the simple reason why universities have been the target of relentless attacks from this regime. Somehow—despite all the legitimate critique mounted on our university system across the board, especially from “left-secular” perspectives—we have managed over the decades to build university spaces that are richly diverse as well as nerve centers of critical thinking. Sinha calls for “decolonizing the Indian mind,” but his understanding of decolonization is a simplistic counter-position of the West to

India, in which both “left” and “secular” count as emanating from the West and Hindutva is the only legitimate Indian perspective. This is a characteristic Hindutva position, which dehistoricizes “India” into a “Hindu” formation extending back over millennia and homogenizes “the West,” while continuously driven by an anxiety to be recognized and validated by this very West.

Hindutva, however, is only one of the planks of the current regime, run by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a party that owes allegiance to the RSS (Narendra Modi has been a loyal member of the RSS since early youth). Its other plank is a vigorously pro-corporate and neoliberal project. However, this project was not inaugurated by the BJP in 2014. It was the previous regime headed by the Indian National Congress that began the process of structural adjustment in the 1990s. Later, between 2004 and 2014, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which for some years was supported by left parties and social movements, continued this process. Universities were beginning to be restructured along neoliberal lines to produce cheap, educated labor for the global economy. On that front, the BJP government is only carrying forward the UPA agenda, albeit more single-mindedly than the UPA could, because the latter was hobbled by the democratic pressures of the alliance it was in. The BJP-led alliance, on the other hand, has an absolute majority in Parliament, and there is nothing to constrain it.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the BJP, however, the UPA was still in the Nehruvian secular mode; at worst, sections of it could be characterized as “soft Hindutva.” Its attitude to dissent, too, was largely relaxed, and universities remained spaces of vibrant protest. Students had been at the forefront of protests across the country, especially in the inaugural years of the twenty-first century, against issues as varied as land acquisition and large-scale displacement by relentlessly neoliberal regimes, corruption, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, homophobic politics, cutbacks in education budgets, anti-worker policies, and rampant caste-based discrimination. Radical critics had characterized this as permitting a harmless venting of anger while the regime continued on its path. However, the current regime’s crackdown and intolerance of the slightest dissent suggests that this emergence of universities as spaces of militant resistance may not have been so harmless after all.

Since 2014 these protests have been specifically against Hindutva politics: violent moves to control the food and dietary habits of large numbers of communities, moral policing of young people, and communal violence set coldly and calculatedly in motion by what Paul Brass has called “institutionalized riot systems.”<sup>4</sup> These protests have been militant but utterly nonviolent, and they have been relentless. These are not elite young people, as they are often portrayed in the media. Thanks to the continued expansion of education, reservation policies, and, in universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), affirmative action through deprivation points, the class, caste, and gender profile of these young people is remarkably

heterogeneous. Like Rohith Vemula of the University of Hyderabad, whose charismatic leadership on the basis of a left-influenced Ambedkarite political vision and a powerful suicide letter galvanized the country; Kanhaiya Kumar, the arrested JNU Students' Union president, jailed for sedition; or Richa Singh, first woman President of Allahabad University Students' Union, battling the entrenched patriarchy of the Hindi-belt campuses, most of them come from modest to extremely poor families, having battled discrimination of different sorts at every stage. When they enter public universities that still are affordable to many, offering spaces of learning, lively debate, intellectual growth, and political understanding of structural injustices—a good part of it outside classrooms—something magical happens: young people from marginalized sectors see that social transformation is possible and that they can be the agents of that transformation.

It is important to note here that public universities have a long history in India. Some were set up by the colonial administration to produce Indian administrators and clerks (the Universities of Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta, for example); others by progressive rulers of princely states in British India (Mysore, Baroda); and yet others by nationalists, either aspiring to be a modern Western university (Aligarh Muslim University and Banaras Hindu University) or a radical alternative (Rabindranath Tagore's Visvabharati). After independence, the network of publicly funded universities was deepened and strengthened, a phenomenon not so common among newly independent countries. University education in India is cheaper than school education (a sector in which private institutions with high fees predominate). Jawaharlal Nehru University was specially set up by an Act of Parliament in 1969, intended to be a university that would “work to promote social justice and secularism, social responsibility, the composite culture of India, scientific temper, and international understanding, and would teach students to be sensitive to the social needs of the country.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, debates in parliament focused on the need to make this a university not for the children of the rich but for the deserving, and JNU's unique deprivation point system has ensured that a diverse and heterogeneous body of students who qualify in the national entrance exam are able to find hostel accommodation and high-quality education affordable to most sectors of Indian society.

There has been considerable work on the transformations that have been sweeping higher education in India in the last few decades. Two significant changes must be noted in the field of higher education in India. The first change visible is in size. Between 2001 and 2010, higher education more than doubled its institutions and raised enrollment by 62 percent. This growth, writes Satish Deshpande, is driven from the demand side by a demographic growth of the young in the population, by expanded access to schooling, and by larger numbers being able to afford higher education.<sup>6</sup> On the supply side, higher education has grown through

privatization, with the private sector now accounting for a majority of both institutions (63.2 percent) and total enrollment (51.5 percent). In addition, in 2006 the government rolled out reservations in higher education institutions for the caste category called OBC (Other Backward Classes), based on the Mandal Commission report, along with which a general expansion in education was inaugurated.

The second, no less significant change is in the socioeconomic profile of those who access higher education. It used to be overwhelmingly dominated by male, urban, upper-caste students and, even more so, teachers. Women now account for 42 percent of total enrollment, and the “lower castes” are also increasing their share. Hindu upper-caste men, who were more than two-thirds of all graduates, are now a minority among enrolled students, though still over-represented relative to their population share. Rural and first-generation entrants have also been increasing.

But what is it these students expect from their education? Deshpande addresses one of the central issues, that of “quality” and the puzzling phenomenon of the proliferation of institutions that do not even aspire to quality. Why, he asks, are worthless credentials not driven out of the market? Why do parents pay astronomical sums for admission of their wards into institutions known to provide little or no training? His answer is sharply insightful and troubling. Higher education credentials in India are a claim to status, not competence. The degree is required only as a legal formality or for its status connotations: “the competence that it claims to certify is an inessential luxury.”<sup>7</sup>

This is why, writes Deshpande, all the exhortations to improve quality fail in the face of the intractable problem of the “quality-indifferent customer,” whom he sees as armed with substantial purchasing power but who in fact could also be the poor aspirant to education, too. He concludes that this might be an inevitable phase of market and social evolution. What, then, is the purpose of higher education at this historical moment? Deshpande provides us with an answer dazzling in its simplicity: “In these social contexts, higher education may be most relevant, not for the training it is supposed to impart but for the sheer space that it provides. Being a legitimate if embattled space, it is able to trigger the destabilizing chain of events that, despite the inevitable tragedies along the way, will ultimately bring irreversible change.”<sup>8</sup>

It is this sweeping transformation that the current regime seeks to curb and control, with drastic seat and budget cuts for research and outright privatization of the higher-education sector, in order to bring both expansion and critical thinking to a halt while transforming the university into a skills factory for the global market.

Despite these rapid transformations and counter-transformations, the question of what constitutes modern knowledge and education has continued to haunt Indian academics, in a particular form that goes back to the early twentieth century.

## The Western University in the Global South

A critique of “Western” knowledge had begun to be articulated by certain quarters of intellectuals in a sustained way from at least the 1950s. In 1954, *Visvabharati Quarterly* (published by Tagore’s university) republished a lecture delivered in 1931, sixteen years before India’s independence, by philosopher Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya. In the lecture, titled “Svaraj in Ideas,” Bhattacharya extended the notion of *swaraj*, or self-determination, to the realm of ideas. Calling cultural domination a subtler form of political domination, he nevertheless was clear that assimilation of an alien culture was not necessarily subjection, and in fact assimilation of new and foreign ideas may be necessary for progress. Cultural subjection is “when one’s traditional cast of ideas and sentiments is superseded without comparison or competition by a new cast representing an alien culture which possesses one like a ghost.” The “Indian mind,” said Bhattacharya, has “subsided below the conscious level of culture” for (Western) educated men and operates only at the level of family life and in some social and religious practices. Meanwhile, Western ideas, “springing as they do from a rich and strong life—the life of the West—they induce in us a shadow mind that functions like a real mind except in the matter of genuine creativeness.”<sup>9</sup> In the discipline of sociology, Shiv Visvanathan has written about scholars associated with the Lucknow school of economics and sociology (late 1950s to early 1960s) who trespassed the borders of disciplines and were concerned with how Indian civilization and community responded to the nationalist project of planned development.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars based in Delhi, such as Ashis Nandy, T. N. Madan, and Rajni Kothari, from the 1980s onward, were at the center of intellectual attempts to understand the specificities of “Indian” culture and politics, bringing to bear a general critique of universal notions of modernity on concepts such as secularism and democracy in India.<sup>11</sup>

Such critiques remained at the margins, however, and the hegemony of a left-secular Nehruvian dispensation over academic institutions, which saw education as the drive “to foster the scientific temperament,” relentlessly delegitimized as indigenist and crypto-Hindutva all attempts to question the Eurocentric canon that university and school curricula had set up.

The organization of knowledge production and transmission in universities all over the Global South is based on the disciplinary model developed in Western universities over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That is to say, while the earliest institutions of higher learning are found from the fifth century onward in what is now South and West Asia, the particular form that the university took in Europe in the nineteenth century has come to assume the form of the only legitimate model of higher education.

This was not, of course, always the case. Knowledge flowed the other way in an earlier age. Mahmood Mamdani points out that the graduation gowns seen all

over the modern world are derived from the Islamic madrasa of West Asia. The early universities of Europe—Oxford, Cambridge, the Sorbonne—borrowed not just these gowns but also much of their curriculum from these institutions, from Greek philosophy to Iranian astronomy to Arab medicine and Indian mathematics. “They had little difficulty at that time in accepting this flowing gown, modeled after the dress of the desert nomad, as the symbol of high learning.”<sup>12</sup>

In his sophisticated study on colonial education policy in India, Sanjay Seth centrally questions the status of modern Western knowledge, “the assumption that it is not merely one mode of knowledge but is knowledge ‘as such,’ and that it must be adequate to its Indian object because it is adequate to all objects.”<sup>13</sup>

Seth places colonial education policy in India within the context of the transformations wrought by modernity itself, beginning with Europe, thus revealing both Europe and “us” to be particular cases of a general history of modernity, as Partha Chatterjee puts it elsewhere. In Europe, too, the advent of modernity had set up for the first time “the knowing subject who is set apart from, and even set up against, the objects to be known.”<sup>14</sup> The world became external to the knower; it became disenchanting. The premodern knowledges of Europe were just as decisively displaced by the modern knowing subject as were the premodern knowledges of India. Premodern knowledges did not presume a sharp distinction between the knower and the world s/he sought to know, and it was precisely this understanding that came to be seen by modern knowledge as the “source and root of the errors of premodern knowledges.”<sup>15</sup>

Seth points out that this was a radically new conception of knowledge, and its subject had to be created through “new pedagogic practices, and through the transformations and disciplines enforced by industrialization and capitalism, modern armies and the modern novel”<sup>16</sup>—a project that was met with resistance even in Europe but in India was further refracted by the fact of its being carried through by violent and coercive colonial rule. It should be clear that Seth’s agenda is not to claim that indigenous knowledges were more “authentic” and that Western education was alien to India. Rather, it is to situate education and pedagogy in colonial India within the framework of a notion of “modernity” that has come since the seventeenth century to hegemonize notions of knowledge globally.

Through the outlining of two controversies from the nineteenth century onwards—one over the “cramming” Indian student and the other over the “moral crisis” into which Western education had plunged the Indian, leading to “inconsistent” beliefs and practices—Seth challenges the normalization of modern Western knowledge as the “obvious, almost the only, mode of knowing.”<sup>17</sup> That these very issues still agitate us in India today in the context of education is something we need to think about very seriously.

The controversy over cramming is over the long-standing complaint that Indian students learn by rote (or in the popular Indianized verb, they “by heart” their lessons—a phrase that perhaps comes closer to capturing the relationship of the premodern self to knowledge?), rather than treating the object of learning as something that is “knowledge as such,” separate from its application. From the perspective of the modern conception of true knowledge—as only that which is independently acquired and sustained by personal conviction—Indian students “failed” even while successfully performing designated tasks. That is, they could pass their exams after cramming, but it would still be counted as a failure of education because “mastery of the task had been achieved by means that sidestepped the transformation of the subject and the relationship between subject and knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> Such a conception of knowledge, Seth points out, “has a lineage,” one going back to the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. This lineage is one that some sections of the Indian elite had internalized, which is why they contributed equally to this lament about the tendency of Indian students to cram.

The second controversy was over the failure of Western education to act as a vehicle of modernity and its simultaneous success in “denationalizing” its products. The complaint here was that Indian students had an instrumental relationship to knowledge, that they saw Western education as helping them to fulfill only their material needs and goals, that education did not transform them into proper modern individuals with modern values. Seth does not, of course, suggest that this attitude to Western education is “resistance” to colonialism. He rejects the idea that the “dowry-seeking crammers” were heroically resisting British hegemony, pointing out that in fact, those who did seek an end to colonial domination did not resist Western education, treating it as a crucial resource for the emergence of a modern nation.

The complaint that Indians are hypocritical in maintaining outward allegiance to modernity while remaining premodern in their selfhood is a common one among modernizing Indian elites even today, articulated within a discourse of “our incomplete modernity.” A remarkably insightful response to this can be found in A. K. Ramanujan’s brilliant little essay “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” in which he shows how in the context-sensitive (“premodern”) Indian way of life, the context-free (the “modern”) becomes simply yet another context.<sup>19</sup> What is understood to be universal modernity, sweeping everything before its path, becomes in India merely one of many contexts within which people work and between which they move seamlessly. Ramanujan’s theoretical innovation lies in stepping away from the field of dichotomized modernity/tradition as well as the notion of “alternative” modernities that leaves normative modernity unquestioned. His framework, in which context-free modernity is merely another context, is not unique to India

but has theoretical purchase globally. The computer programmer anywhere in the world observing a religious fast—for Lent, Ramadan, or Navratri—is an instance of Ramanujan’s insight.

Thus, while the hegemonic drive of “modernity” did colonize the imagination globally, it never quite managed to hermetically seal all its borders: this is the insight we can take away from Ramanujan.

In a parallel argument, Seth makes it clear that there was not one “indigenous” knowledge that confronted modern Western education, but several knowledges and practices, differentiated by the intended users and the groups and castes to whom they were available and from whom they were restricted. The characteristic trait they shared, however, was what all “premodern” knowledges, Western and Indian, had in common—unlike the rationalization associated with modernity which freed knowledge from substantive contexts and made it in principle independent of its uses; in traditional learning, the content and form are indistinguishable. It is only with rationalization that knowledges and skills that could only be learned *in the doing* now presuppose a mastery of the theory that can not only be independently learned but the knowledge of which is superior to “merely” learning by practice.

Seth argues that knowledges “are not forms of cognizing a world external to them but rather are constitutive of this world.”<sup>20</sup> Modern knowledge, then, reworks the world and its past in terms comprehensible only within itself. Seth correctly points out the ethical unsustainability of this position, which characterizes our contemporaries as somehow inhabiting a past that we have left behind.

From this perspective, even alternative nationalist visions of education did not escape the normalizing thrust of modern Western knowledge. That *modern Western knowledge* became identified with *knowledge as such*, is, in Sanjay Seth’s words, as much “the fruit of nationalist strivings as it is of colonial imposition.”<sup>21</sup> Universities and school education in independent India have been set firmly within this frame, with few exceptions.

### “Other” Knowledges as the Outside of Education

A significant document that attempted to challenge this idea of knowledge and education is the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 2005. Its focus is on school education, but as a general statement about knowledge and education, it is inspiring and creative. The NCF holds that unless learners can locate their individual standpoints in relation to the contexts represented in textbooks and relate this knowledge to their experiences, knowledge is reduced to mere information. The point is that students bring with them their own experiences of the world, which is rarely heeded. The examples the NCF cites are about local knowledges—traditions of naming and categorizing plants, ways of harvesting and storing water, or ways

of practicing sustainable agriculture. Sometimes these may be different from the way in which school knowledge approaches the subject, and the NCF suggests that in such situations, teachers could recognize and help students develop projects of study based on the local tradition, comparing it with the school tradition. “In some cases, as in the case of classifying plants, the two traditions may be simply parallel and based on different criteria considered significant. In other cases, for example the classification and diagnosis of illnesses, it may challenge and contradict local belief systems. It is also possible to consider that there are cases where the local belief system seems more ecologically valid than the textbook opinion.”<sup>22</sup>

Now, the knowledges and traditions students bring with them are of course not simply power-neutral knowledges. The NCF, addressing this directly, says: “Community-based identities of gender, caste, class and religion are primary identities but they can also be oppressive and reaffirm social inequalities and hierarchies. School knowledge can also provide a lens through which children can develop a critical understanding of their social reality. It could also provide them space to talk about their experiences and anxieties within their homes.”<sup>23</sup>

An earlier left-secular model of education in India assumed that such beliefs can simply be “eradicating.” But the NCF takes the more difficult path: “Communities may also have questions about the inclusion or exclusion of particular knowledge and experiences in the school curriculum. The school must then be prepared to listen to their concerns, and to persuade them to see the educational value of such decisions.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the NCF believes the process of social transformation to be complex and multilayered, involving the student not only in the classroom but as located in her family and community. Most important, this process is understood to be uncompromisingly bound within democratic procedures—listening, persuading, mutually learning.

The prejudice and power of the teacher, of course, are central and inadequately confronted. Across Indian universities today, and most powerfully in my university, JNU, students from historically marginalized communities have been foregrounding the *viva voce* section of admissions to research programs as the space in which class and caste prejudice play out most explicitly. It is held that the predominantly *savarna* (“upper” caste) and privileged faculty use this section to exclude students from marginalized caste and class positions. While the written exam is anonymous, identified by a roll number alone, it is argued that the *viva* exposes caste and class markers, as well as the inability to be articulate in spoken English, and enables large-scale exclusion of “undesirable” students.

The question of power and prejudice acquires an altogether different dimension when we consider the university of the Global South. If our struggle is to recover knowledges buried by history, to subvert existing knowledge formations, and to generate new knowledges out of local histories and practices, then we cannot

be training ourselves merely to enter existing fields of settled knowledges that have emerged from the history and location of the Global North. Some of these fields of settled knowledges have been challenged in recent decades, first by feminist and then by Dalit scholarship, bringing in points of view that could not have emerged had the “settledness” of the knowledge itself not been called into question.

Here it is instructive to consider critically a text generally accepted to be an illustration of radical pedagogy, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* by French philosopher Jacques Rancière, which from the perspective of the Global South seems curiously innocent about the drive of assimilative power. In the following section, we compare it to Paulo Freire’s model of subversive pedagogy, which sees knowledge as dynamic and unsettled.

### Settled and Unsettling Knowledges

In this text Rancière writes about Joseph Jacotot, a schoolteacher driven into exile during the period of monarchical restoration in France in the early nineteenth century, who developed a method of showing illiterate parents how they could themselves teach their children to read. Landing a job in a Flemish-speaking part of Belgium, he had to teach children who spoke no French, while he spoke no Flemish. He tried an experiment with a recently published bilingual edition of Homer (in French and Flemish). He asked his students through an interpreter to learn on their own the French text with the help of the Flemish translation. After some time, he asked them to write about the text in French, and he was astonished to find they could do so as well as French students would have done. He had not taught them the first elements of French, neither spelling nor grammar. The students had looked for the French words that corresponded to words they knew in Flemish and figured out the grammar by themselves.

Jacotot’s experience shows us, writes Rancière, that the pedagogical problem is “to reveal an intelligence to itself.”<sup>25</sup> Anything can be used: a song, a prayer that the student knows by heart; there is always something the student knows that can be used as a point of comparison. The master’s two fundamental tasks, then, are *interrogation*—he demands speech, the manifestation of an intelligence that was not aware of itself—and *verification*, that the work be done with attention.<sup>26</sup> To do this, a highly skilled master is not required and is even a liability because his knowledge discreetly leads the students to the right answer rather than allowing their own intelligence to do the work. In this method, called “universal teaching,”<sup>27</sup> equality is not a goal to be attained but assumed as a starting point. Anyone is capable of grasping the most difficult of ideas since the same intelligence is at work in all human endeavors.

Now, while this is the kind of radical pedagogy of which we can immediately see the progressive potential, it seems to me that it addresses only one kind of

knowledge and one kind of learning. That is, its radicalism lies in using one's own intelligence rather than that of a teacher to enter into an existing body of knowledge, with its own established rules, "to learn how to do x." But what if one thinks of knowledges as having to be subverted, of existing knowledges as embodying dominant discourses of power, of knowledges as constituting subjects of governmentality, in Foucauldian terms? Then the point would not be to learn the rules well but also to subvert them, to constitute new bodies of knowledge and counter-selves.

For instance, Rancière does not consider the politics of the gradual marginalization of Flemish by the French nation-state in the making, so that it would always be Flemish speakers having to learn French rather than vice versa. He does not consider the ways in which modernity in general introduced standardized forms of organizing time and space (maps, calendars) that did considerable violence to the peasant knowledges it was still replacing in Jacotot's time. Thus, Rancière writes that the locksmith who does not know the alphabet can look at a calendar: "Doesn't he know the order of the months and can't he thus figure out January, February, March... He knows that February has only 28 days. He sees that one column is shorter than the others and he will recognize '28.'"<sup>28</sup> However, the Gregorian calendar that Rancière takes for granted has nothing to do with the natural cycles by which peasants live, and illiterate people have to learn to read the calendar as much as they have to learn the alphabet; it is not a knowledge that is inborn or naturally imbibed in all worlds and contexts, even in the twentieth century.

This way of learning appears, then, to be about learning to enter and negotiate existing formations of knowledge. From the perspective of the Global South, such education would then amount to learning to negotiate worlds of already produced knowledge emanating from the powerful parts of the world. It would amount to learning how to do x, where x remains uninterrogated and its status as knowledge unquestioned.

It is useful here to consider an argument made by Peter Winch, who, writing about the relationship between language and reality, makes a distinction between two kinds of "languages."<sup>29</sup> One is a set of linguistic conventions, such as English, French, and so on. When one knows one language and wants to learn another, one remains within the same world, learning English names for the objects and experiences one already knows in French. Thus, when one learns to command, say, in English (to say, "Do this"), one is not learning to command per se. But the differences between the language of science/modernity and that of other worldviews (he uses the example of magic practices of an African tribe called the Azande) are not of this order. When one learns mathematics, say, or science, one learns a whole worldview, a set of beliefs, of which the language is only an expression. Learning to prove something mathematically is not simply learning a new way of expressing

something I already know in another language. I am learning a new action that can only be performed in that language.

For instance, debates over secularism in India stumble, in the very first instance, over its translation into Hindi. Both its “translations”—one as *Sarv dharma sama bhava*, which means the state must treat all religions equally, and the other as *dharm-nirpekshata*, which means that the state must maintain equal distance from all religions—really express very different relationships between state and religion from the European notions of church-state separation. However, for decades these two phrases were seen as simply “translating” the English concept in some deficient way, although they are closer to traditions in the Indian subcontinent, where multiple religious and cultural communities have coexisted whether affably or by deftly managing conflict, over centuries. In the Indian subcontinent, no philosophical tradition, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, or Sikh, has seen the state as separate from religion—and yet, the state and religion were never fused as in medieval Christianity.

Recognizing these difficulties, the framers of the Indian Constitution decided not to use the term secularism at all; it was inserted twenty-six years later through a constitutional amendment. In political discourse, however, secularism became quite a central category and assumed a self-evident and already accomplished state of being, when in fact the task was to learn an entire universe of doing. The complicated ways in which left parties and movements in India have had to negotiate religious and cultural practices, for a long time seen as necessarily regressive, and the new formulations of what secularism can be in the face of the Hindutva onslaught are indications of the enormity of the task before us regarding knowledges old, new, and reconstructed and the radically different universes languages can give birth to.

The reason Jacotot’s method requires no teacher or the “ignorant teacher” is that education is seen as learning to do in a new language what you already know in another. You don’t see beyond or question the world you are given; you learn to negotiate it. The calendar can teach you numbers and the alphabet only if you are already immersed in a world marked by these things. Rancière thus fails to question how some knowledges attain the status of *knowledge*, while other knowledges are to be discarded.

Scholar-activist Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a different view of knowledge and learning from the one presented by Rancière. In “problem-posing education,” as he calls it, no one teaches another, but nor is anyone self-taught. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-students and students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and the teacher-student and students-teachers emerge: they become jointly responsible for a process in which they all grow.<sup>30</sup> Thus, this model gives up on the idea of the all-knowing teacher but not on the idea of a teacher altogether. It

seems to me that the “teacher” in this understanding is the entry of *the outside* into one’s world, destabilizing its codes of meaning, common sense, and order. In this sense, the students are the outside of the teacher’s world and she of theirs. The teacher knows ten things her students do not know, but they know ten things she doesn’t, as Freire finds when he plays a game with the peasants’ group he is visiting, in which they ask him ten questions (What’s soil liming? What’s green fertilizer?) and he asks them ten (What’s an intransitive verb? What’s epistemology?).<sup>31</sup>

In problem-posing education, everybody is a student-teacher; people are in the process of *becoming*, “unfinished beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality,” thus necessitating that education be an ongoing activity, an activity that asks us to “consider reality critically.”<sup>32</sup>

And now, consider this story of the birth of a new language, a story that raises significant questions for our understanding of how bodies of knowledge are formed and transformed. After the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, for the first time in its history, a huge nationwide effort was made to educate deaf children. Hundreds of deaf students were enrolled in two schools. They had never been introduced to any of the world’s existing sign language systems and came to the schools with only the simplest kind of gestural signs they had developed within their families. Their teachers were new and inexperienced and found it difficult to communicate with their students, but the students themselves had no problem at all in “talking” to one another. With great rapidity they began to build on the common pool of signs, and a complex new language began to emerge, which has now come to be called Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL). Some years down the line, an even more interesting development was noticed. As younger children entered the school system, they not only picked up the language their seniors had developed, but they confidently began to break the existing language rules. They invented new signs and deformed old ones, and these new signs that did not obey the old rules filtered back into the language, making it more complex, richer, and more varied.<sup>33</sup>

The development of NSL raises all kinds of issues for scholars of sign language and linguists generally, but I was struck by a different kind of question. Does the continuing development of NSL tell us something about how knowledge is created and how shared bodies of knowledge are transformed?

In this era of exclusive and limiting rights in intellectual property, in which we live under the crushing myth of either the solitary individual producing knowledge in isolation or of the corporation inventing knowledge from scratch in its laboratories, it is worth recognizing a simple truth underscored by the story of NSL: that human beings produce knowledge by coming together in groups of different sorts and that all knowledge is always situated in an extensive preexisting field.

More important, it is the younger members, the newer entrants to a community, that make the breakthroughs that lead to new kinds of knowledges. They very

rapidly learn what the seniors of the community have developed painfully over the years and then take that body of knowledge in new and unimagined directions.

But what really leaps out from this story is that knowledge develops when rules are broken. The faithful following of old rules keeps a body of knowledge safe and pure. Safe and pure and sterile. It is the breaking of rules that permits uncharted directions, fresh insights, productive mistakes: the language that develops from rule breaking reveals an entirely new world.

### Subversion and New Knowledges

The NCF of 2005 took a brave leap into rethinking knowledge and education along these lines. But most syllabi in Indian universities assume the universality of “theory,” simply applying that theory to local specificities and finding large parts of them lacking in the proper development of modern qualities such as democracy, economic development, secularism, individualism, and so on.

However, in different ways and in different places from Manipal in southern India to Kampala in Uganda, attempts are being made over the early decades of the twenty-first century to genuinely “provincialize Europe” and to destabilize what Sudipta Kaviraj has termed “Euronormality,”<sup>34</sup> asserting *location* as the starting point of knowledge and theorizing, drawing on intellectual traditions of the Global South, making *their* concepts the points of reference. As Mahmood Mamdani puts it:

The universalization of particular modes of thought goes alongside the particularization of other modes of thought. The centuries between the conquest of the Americas and the decolonization movement signified by Bandung witnessed two related movements in the history of thought. On the one hand, Eurocentric thought was elevated to a universal; on the other, non-European modes of thought were containerized as so many “traditions” of no more than local significance. An assessment of the intellectual legacy of this period calls for a double task: alongside a critique of Eurocentrism, an exploration of engagements across various non-European modes of thought bounded as so many discrete “traditions.”<sup>35</sup>

The idea of “applying theory” produced in one context to “understand practice” in another assumes that “political practice” is “non-theoretical,” completely bereft of any discursive-theoretical content so that any theory (from the West) can be used to make sense of political practice anywhere. But “all political practice is always constituted by some form of reflection and thought—theoretical or non-theoretical—and as we realize painfully today, at least one part of theorization must be about making sense of ‘practice’ through an understanding of the subject’s own world and her categories of thought.”<sup>36</sup>

What follows, therefore, indicates some forms that the project of actually decolonizing knowledge has taken in the Indian academy—not in the glib, derivative, Hindutvavaadi way, but through attempts to rigorously traverse fields of knowledge in the Global South, while opening up both “Western” and “Indian” knowledge to interrogation. We find over the last two decades, in particular, imaginative and creative ways in which individual courses or entire syllabi have been designed or reworked in different parts of India, in universities as well as in non-university teaching spaces, such as courses offered by publicly funded research institutions.

Sundar Sarukkai, who set up the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities in 2010, raises as an ethical issue the question of privileging “theory” over empirically grounded work, when, in these parts of the world, narratives founded on *experience* are forms of theorizing, especially for the dis-privileged castes. He also states the importance of engaging with the world not only through texts and thinking but through “doing.” Science students do experiments, students of art do art and theatre, but humanities students should also have to conduct their learning through the body and through doing something concretely: this has to be an essential part of knowledge formation in the South. How to do this, and do it effectively, are the questions we must start with, Sarukkai insists.<sup>37</sup>

From a radically different perspective, though, Gopal Guru lays claim to *theory* as opposed to *experience*, for he sees the non-Brahmin as forever imprisoned in the empirical, while the Brahmin lays claim to theory: “Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical shudras.”<sup>38</sup>

It should be clear through these dense debates that by “location” I do not mean indigeneity or authenticity vis-à-vis the West. Rather, with the term *location*, I mean to gesture towards the materiality of spatial and temporal coordinates that inevitably suffuse all theorizing. A sensitivity to location would invariably lead to a productive contamination of the purity of empty universalist categories and challenge their claim to speak about everywhere from nowhere. Curricula must start with one’s location in this sense, the questions about the world that puzzle you from your vantage point. A comparative dimension is inescapable: issues in other parts of the world at one level seem familiar to those in one’s own, but they get articulated in unfamiliar ways, while concerns specific to a location nevertheless resonate, echoing predicaments faced at some other place or in some other time. Additionally, in our part of the world, the question of language and translation is critical. It is, after all, not just a question of translating words from one language to the other; it is about engaging with entire ways of life and modes of thinking arising from different trajectories of time and space. Every translation is the translation of entire conceptual universes. We also need to go beyond notions of “inter-” and “multi-”

disciplinarity and attempt the dismantling of disciplinary fields and their reconstitution. “Interdisciplinarity” still assumes basic and settled distinctions between, to take one instance, the economic and the political, and an interdisciplinary interaction as involving taking one into account for a fuller understanding of the other. However, we need to move into thinking about *indisciplinarity*, which is about occupying the interstices of settled disciplines and about their consequent dismantling, bringing into view new objects of knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

Linking together the questions of location, translation, and discipline, Sundar Sarukkai puts it this way: “the living ‘local’ by its very definition cannot be bound within a strict discipline.” Therefore, we need to move across ideas in different disciplines. “Thus an interdisciplinary focus is necessarily a movement across established intellectual traditions as well—of the West and India, of English and Sanskrit, Sanskrit and the vernacular and so on.”<sup>40</sup>

How does one teach something called thought or theory in the current conjuncture, when we are no longer satisfied with being equipped to enter existing fields of knowledge, but need to subvert settled notions of what knowledge is? The questions raised above, of translation and indisciplinarity, become key to this new project. Equally important is to recognize the vast and multiple and mutual flows of ideas across “East” and “West” over the centuries that have fashioned human knowledge. Let me share an anecdote to indicate how we may sometimes serendipitously, like detectives, stumble upon histories of such cultural and intellectual exchanges. In a reading group on third-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna’s work, we came across the statement that Buddhist metaphysics “anticipated” David Hume’s analysis of identity over time. Already the notion that ideas in Western philosophy are simply anticipated elsewhere and in another time, quite coincidentally, had been unraveled for us by understanding the histories of cultural exchanges and flows. But in this specific instance, imagine our excitement when one of us soon afterward came across the piece of information that, by 1727, Buddhism, via a French Jesuit in Tibet, had made its way to David Hume.<sup>41</sup>

Indisciplinarity enables us to overcome one daunting prospect in reworking curricula—the lack of knowledge of Sanskrit, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and countless other languages. How is one to think across diverse traditions and modes of knowledge without any familiarity with those languages? The answer is to turn to work available in English in disciplinary fields that have tended to be secluded from what is called “theory.” Rich seams of material await us in Middle Eastern studies, religious studies, Japanese studies, Chinese studies, Indian studies. Scholarship located in entirely different debates and bodies of knowledge takes on new life and meaning when placed in conversation in a syllabus entitled “Political Thought” or “Critical Thought in the Global South”: Walter Mignolo in conversation with Naoki

Sakai; Al Farabi with, of course, Plato; Ambedkar with Fanon. Conceptual translations and conversations across these traditions have been intriguing, maybe even productively misleading.

The question of Indian languages in a context of English hegemony requires a different discussion, but the richness of debate and discussion in Indian languages and the problem of what counts as theory or not in those languages are providing another space for thought. Most Indian academics who write in English have access to at least one Indian language—this skill, it is being recognized, must be honed and developed. Rather than searching for a predefined “theory” in Indian languages, we have started looking at what is actually being done in Indian languages—literary work, poetry, polemical tracts—and attempting to bring that to bear upon our present.

Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey define the “the work of theory” before us as that of “contemporizing and reassembling.”<sup>42</sup> “Contemporizing” involves, in their view, “a change in the very understanding of what thought traditions are. It involves treating diverse intellectual traditions as lived traditions, whose style and substance reverberate in the present, structuring the way people live and make sense of the world.” Ambedkar in this understanding not only recovered Buddhism through his conversion but contemporized it.

We began this article by suggesting that universities embody moments of utopia. These moments are those that dismantle settled knowledge and set up unprecedented conversations, conversations which permit the outside to enter and transform them and which enter the outside to transform it. In the process, education somehow spills out of its respectable limits and becomes a relentless act of social transformation.

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#### Notes

1. Savarkar, *Essentials*.
2. Sinha, “Of Swayamsevaks.”
3. Menon and Nigam, *Power and Contestation*.
4. Brass, “Development of an Institutionalised Riot System,” 4839.
5. Kidwai, “UGC and JNU.”

6. Deshpande, "Revisiting."
7. Deshpande, "Revisiting."
8. Deshpande, "Revisiting."
9. Bhattacharya, "Svaraj in Ideas," 385. The spelling *swaraj* was used when *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* republished the lecture in 1984.
10. Visvanathan, "Official Hegemony and Contesting Pluralisms."
11. Visvanathan, "Official Hegemony and Contesting Pluralisms."
12. Mamdani, "Beware Bigotry."
13. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 4.
14. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 4.
15. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 4.
16. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 5.
17. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 3.
18. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 28.
19. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?"
20. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 185.
21. Seth, *Subject Lessons*, 182.
22. *National Curriculum Framework*, 28.
23. *National Curriculum Framework*, 29.
24. *National Curriculum Framework*, 52.
25. Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 28.
26. Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 29.
27. Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 16.
28. Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 28.
29. Winch, "Understanding."
30. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.
31. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 46–47.
32. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 56–57. I am aware of readings of Freire's pedagogy as paternalistic, but I find them unconvincing. One of the key sources of this critique is his use of the term *mutism*, which has been misunderstood as his seeing the oppressed as awaiting speech to be conferred upon them. On the contrary, Freire uses the term to suggest an agential act of silence by even those groups that do not "concretely express a generative thematic—a fact which might appear to imply the nonexistence of themes" but which is, on the contrary, "suggesting a very dramatic theme: the theme of silence." Freire's method therefore requires that researchers and the people (who would normally be considered objects of that investigation) should act as coinvestigators. "The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration of their thematic," writes Freire, "the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematic, take possession of that reality" (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 106).
33. Yong, "New Nicaraguan Sign Language."
34. Kaviraj, "Marxism in Translation," 189. Kaviraj explains the term as an implicit European reference that orients modern social sciences toward European intellectual hegemony, much like a compass orients one toward the north.
35. Mamdani, "Reading."
36. Menon, Nigam, and Palshikar, *Critical Studies*, 8.
37. Sarukkai, "Note on Teaching."

38. Guru, "How Egalitarian," 5003.
39. The term *indisciplinarity* has been developed in the course of doing feminist scholarship, a field that has resisted the "discipline" of mainstream disciplines in many ways. It has resonances with Jacques Rancière's use of the term *indisciplinarity* to refer to his method (see Rancière, "Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity"), but many feminist scholars, including myself, have arrived at it by following a parallel track.
40. Sarukkai, "Note on Teaching."
41. Gopnik, "Could David Hume Have Known."
42. Banerjee, Nigam, and Pandey, "Work of Theory."

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