

# Macaulay and his Cognitive Imagination: Defining Knowledge in Contemporary India

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## Abstract

This paper examines and explains how Thomas Babington Macaulay laid the foundations of what we might call the cognitive paradigm for modern India, which we follow even now. He played a key role in the making of a future class of mediators and middlemen for the Empire. He was instrumental in creating many of the institutional frameworks and psychological conditions, that even seventy years after the formal demise of colonial rule, remain unchanged to the core. This is as true today in the so-called globalised era of American domination, as it was in the nineteenth century during the high noon of British Imperialism. But it is high time that we question the dominant values governing our society. The main problem is the popular discrimination between the skilled and schooled — rooted in the accepted notions of what counts as knowledge in the first place. However, it has also to be admitted that in defining knowledge, colonial notion was accentuated further by our own hierarchy of caste.

*Key words: knowledge, cognition, epistemology, critical noun, PLSI.*

Who was Macaulay and what is his significance to our history and destiny? The standard colonial histories tell us that he was a liberal historian and statesman who held a number of key positions in government in Britain between the 1820s and the 1850s. In 1834, he was appointed the very first Law Member on the Council of the Governor-General of India — then the highest administrative body in the country. A year earlier, the 1833 Government of India Act had effectively nationalised the East India Company, thereby creating, for the first time, a centralised government of British India accountable only to the British Crown. On his voyage to India, Macaulay read not Indian but Greek classics — indeed, his knowledge of the country whose future he would legislate rested on that infamous ‘classic’, James Mill’s six-volume *History of British India*.<sup>1</sup> Written by a man who had neither visited India nor learnt even one Indian language, Mill’s History was the standard Empire primer that all India-bound imperial cadres had to read as preparation to rule. Macaulay became one of

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the key architects of the British Raj. As per the Government of India Act of 1833, he was charged with the establishment of the rule of law in the country, which had been plundered at the hands of East India Company officials. From Robert Clive to Warren Hastings, and beyond, they had used their power to personally enrich themselves. The mere four years Macaulay stayed in India left behind a legacy which long outlasted not merely his death, in 1859, but also the end of the British Raj, in 1947. His three key achievements were the establishment of the Indian Penal Code, the Indian Civil Service and an English based system of education.

First, Macaulay drafted his comprehensive penal code for the whole of British India. As president of the law commission in Calcutta, he was tasked with reforming and codifying Indian law after the legal chaos of the preceding decades. He insisted that only a comprehensive new code, rather than partial reform, would create the necessary stability in law and order. Delayed by various objections and consequent amendments, the Indian Penal Code did not come into legal force till 1862. It remains largely in place as the cornerstone of the Indian judicial system more than a century and a half later. 'It is the genius of this man,' the historian KM Panikkar wrote, 'narrow in his Europeanism, self-satisfied in his sense of English greatness, that gives life to modern India as we know it. He was India's new Manu, the spirit of modern law incarnate.'<sup>2</sup>

Second, Macaulay created a system which culminated in the Indian Civil Service after 1861, following the provision for it in the Government of India Act, 1853. After returning to Britain in 1854, he chaired a committee tasked with the creation of a new system of competitive examinations through which young officers would be recruited in Britain to administer the top imperial bureaucracy in India. Till then, such appointments were made through patronage. After 1862, a limited number of Indians were also eligible to sit for the examinations. Rabindranath Tagore's eldest brother, Satyendranath Tagore, was the first Indian to become an ICS officer. The ICS became a model for Britain's domestic civil service later on, a marked departure from its own past practices of patronage and nepotism. The much-coveted Indian Administrative Service, or the IAS, the backbone of independent India's bureaucracy, is what the ICS was called after 1947.

But the transformation of education was Macaulay's most decisive

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accomplishment. Through his famous ‘Minute on Education’ produced in 1835, he settled the fate of the main language of instruction in the country. In it, Macaulay pushed aggressively and successfully for an education policy that would adopt English over Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, which were the languages used for instruction in the schools supported by the East India Company up until then. Despite not knowing Sanskrit, Macaulay had the imperial arrogance to claim:

It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgement used at preparatory schools in England.<sup>3</sup>

In many places Macaulay resorted to hyperbolic rhetoric to mask his enormous ignorance of the languages he was rejecting. His racist views become apparent in infamous claims such as this:

I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues: 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.<sup>4</sup>

Macaulay realised the limitations of resources at the disposal of the Raj, and so, keeping an eye on the imperial administrative needs of the future, he focused on generating a class of Indians who would enable the few – the British – to rule the many in the imperial interest. He wrote:

[I]t is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to 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. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature.<sup>5</sup>

It was this class of ‘good English scholars’ (colloquially identified as ‘brown sahibs’ or ‘babus’) who mediated between the few British rulers and the vast sea of Indian humanity for over the century of colonial rule which followed. We may not have to exert our imagination much further to find Macaulay’s children in independent India. The writer of this essay has certainly fit the description on many an occasion. For that matter, many

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readers of an article such as this would also qualify. We are indispensable today as well-paid and loyal mediators between the new ruler of the world – the American empire, with its ever-expanding multinational corporations – and the vast Indian citizenry.

It is crucial to note that during the period when India was transitioning from Company to Crown rule, much existed that ceased to exist soon thereafter. Macaulay was not writing imperial history on a blank slate. The existing biographies of him do not tell us about the state of education in India before his intervention. Even Macaulay's critics seem to assume that there were no arrangements for education in India before he arrived. To understand the violence that Macaulay perpetrated, it is necessary to consider the forms of education that did exist in many parts of India at the time of his large-scale intervention. Dharmapal did pioneering work in documenting systematically 'the reality of the India of this period: its society, its infrastructure, its manners and institutions, their strengths and weaknesses.' While his work stretches over half a dozen volumes, the one most relevant for the present discussion is *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*, first published in 1983.<sup>6</sup> Here we find gathered in one place facts relating to school education and higher learning before Macaulay's 'Minute', taken from surprisingly extensive surveys and reports by district collectors and other British administrators. British administrators carried out surveys of the status of indigenous education in Bengal and Bihar during the 1830s. A report filed by William Adam, a former missionary, observed that there were an estimated 100,000 village schools across the 150,000 villages in this region – although recent research has shown that the number of these schools was closer to 16,000, still a significant number. These schools had varying languages of instruction, from Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic to English, Hindi, Bengali and Oriya. Adam also found at least 100 institutions of higher learning in each of the 18 districts of Bengal, in which over 10,000 scholars were enrolled. The subjects taught at these institutions ranged from grammar, logic, law and medicine to mythology, rhetoric, *vedanta*, *mimamsa* and *sankhya* philosophy.<sup>7</sup> In western India, Thomas Munro, a champion of elitist education in the English language, had to admit, in his own 'Minute on Education' produced in 1826, that the general standard of schooling in the Bombay region was 'higher than most European countries at no very distant period.'<sup>8</sup> He counted 12,498 schools providing education

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in Marathi and Gujarati. He advised against ‘any interference whatever in the native school.’ In 1820, GL Pendergast, a member of the council of Bombay Presidency, the highest administrative body of the region, noted:

[T]here is hardly a village, great or small, throughout our territories in which there is not at least one school, and in larger villages more; where young natives are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, upon a system so economical, and at the same time so simple and effectual, that there is hardly a cultivator or petty dealer who is not competent to keep his own accounts with a degree of accuracy, in my opinion, beyond what we meet with amongst the lower orders in our own country; whilst the more splendid dealers and bankers keep their books with a degree of ease, conciseness, and clearness I rather think fully equal to those of British merchants.<sup>9</sup>

In 1823, the collector of Bellary in Madras Presidency, AD Campbell, reported:

The economy with which children are taught to write in the native schools, and the system by which the more advanced scholars are caused to teach the less advanced and at the same time to confirm their own knowledge is certainly admirable.<sup>10</sup>

In 1814, Munro, then the governor of Madras, observed that ‘every village had a school.’ When a full formal survey of indigenous education in Madras Presidency, was done between 1822 and 1823, it found 11,575 schools with 157,195 students, for a total population of 12.85 million. Dharampal notes that England, with a population of 9.5 million people, had only 75,000 enrolled in schools, half of whom attended school just for a few hours every Sunday. In Madras Presidency, the survey also found 1,094 colleges with 5,431 students. The high ratio of schools and colleges to students was in keeping with the prescriptions of the traditional Indian education systems they followed, embodied in such institutions as gurukuls, pathshalas, madrasas and agraharams. The other striking aspect of the evidence gathered was that *soodras* constituted, depending on the region, between 35 and 85 percent of all male students enrolled in schools. Instruction was given in languages that varied from Sanskrit, Persian, Hindavi to Oriya, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil. Among the subjects taught in higher learning were theology, law, metaphysics, ethics, astronomy and medicine. Dharampal’s collation of British documents lists

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dozens of texts which were being used in the schools and colleges.<sup>11</sup> Dharampal also quotes British records that give extensive statistical data on higher learning through private tutors in various regions of Madras Presidency. Additional subjects such as poetry, literature, music and dance appear in these reports. A very small number of girls were reported as enrolled in formal schooling, while many others were being educated at home by tutors. The British annexed Punjab in the late 1840s. In 1882, a former principal of Government College in Lahore, GW Leitner, prepared an extensive official survey of indigenous education. It showed a drastic decline in enrolment in schools of varying denominations between 1849 and 1882: from 330,000 to 190,000 in a little over a generation. Leitner wrote of

how in spite of the best intentions, the most public-spirited officers, and a generous Government that had the benefit of the traditions of other provinces, the true education of the Punjab was crippled, checked, and is nearly destroyed; how opportunities for its healthy revival and development were either neglected or perverted; and how, far beyond the blame attaching to individuals, our system stands convicted of worse than official failure.<sup>12</sup>

Based on the extensive evidence assembled by him, Dharampal inferred: According to this hard data, in terms of the content, and the proportion of those attending institutional school education, the situation in India in 1800 is certainly not inferior to what obtained in England then; and in many respects Indian schooling seems to have been much more extensive (and, it should be remembered, that it is a greatly damaged and disorganised India that one is referring to). The content of studies was better than what was then studied in England, The duration of study was more prolonged. The method of school teaching was superior and it is this very method which is said to have greatly helped the introduction of popular education in England but which had prevailed in India for centuries.<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi was not on weak ground when he claimed at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London in 1931,

[T]oday India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago ... because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to

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root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished.<sup>14</sup>

The originality of Gandhi's critique of colonialism was that he saw colonial rule as more than just a form of political domination or economic exploitation. His critique of British rule was fundamentally a critique of Macaulay's legacy, of the British system of education that kept the Raj alive and of the cognitive control that the colonial powers exercised over the Indian elite. As he wrote in *Hind Swaraj*: 'The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them.'<sup>15</sup> It is worth remembering that at no point over two centuries of the Raj did the British population in India ever much exceed 100,000 people, the majority of whom were army personnel. The British could rule such a vast subcontinent with so few of their own soldiers and civilians by projecting a hypermasculine image, wherein the colony was always governed by a military mentality, as if it was a war camp. Colonial coercion was renewed cognitively on a daily basis, in order to firmly establish imperial control of public consciousness. The rise of the anti-colonial consciousness that Gandhi inspired was a cognitive as much as a political awakening. However, the post-colonial period showed more continuity than change, as old habits of thought and practice remained entrenched. At the purely formal level, 1947 did change a few things. Sovereign India had its own constitution and its own elected leaders in government. But the past persisted with respect to the fundamentals – of language, law and administration – with which independent India began its journey. The IPC and IAS remain in place, as does the English-based system of education. Most importantly, the decolonisation of the ruling elite mind never happened. If one thinks only of the place of the English language, its role in education, administration, media, business and public life in general, one would have to acknowledge Macaulay as the man whose India, more than anyone else's, we continue to live in. At the governmental level, neither Nehru, nor any of his successors, down to Narendra Modi, have found the courage to take up the key challenge of decolonising public consciousness along the lines that men such as Gandhi and Tagore had hoped for.

After Independence, Indian elites were led by a spirit of optimism in reimagining the economic and political frameworks which they inherited.

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They were familiar with the ills of colonialism, and had gained confidence by having fought and defeated perhaps the greatest superpower of the day. Moreover, following the Second World War, a bipolar global geopolitical arena opened up space for imagining other futures. This resulted in experiments with Soviet-inspired economic planning by the Indian state, as well as in the emergence of the non-aligned movement in international relations. But, by the 1970s, cracks began to emerge in both the mixed model of the economy and the non-aligned model of international relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union finally put an end to these struggling experiments, by realigning Indian economic and political structures with the lone remaining imperial power, the United States. The global age, seduced by the American dream, arrived in India too, and the country's elites lost no time in embracing American way of life. Our elites could easily adapt to the radically changed world after 1991 since the inner cognitive software for this adaptation was not only in place, but was always in active use underneath the surface of publicly projected illusions. Since the 1960s, Indians had been going to the United States to study and work. Our elites, already Westernised from the days of the Raj, were increasingly Americanised in the decades that followed 1947, even if the official positions of the state did not change till much later. Discussions of 'post-colonial' India may seem embarrassingly premature in light of the loss of effective sovereignty in multiple dimensions, and the vulnerable terms on which globalising India has been willfully roped into the dynamics of a New York and London - dominated system of global finance. The Indian state lacks its Chinese counterpart's confidence in capital controls, allowing vast sums of capital to leave the country at will in moments of volatility. A certain kind of voluntary colonialism has come into being in India, which operates under a deceiving guise of hyper-nationalism, especially under the present regime. The needs of all of rural India, implying over 850 million people dependent on agriculture and traditional livelihoods, are very low down on the cognitive priorities of the policy elites, whose faith in the globally integrated economy cannot tackle the question of how to include excluded aspirants in their vision of the future. It would be appropriate to describe what we have in India now as corporate nationalism defined by a heroic belief in India Inc.

Is there a good biography of the man, who influenced India's destiny so



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profoundly? Yes, there are a few, but they are written by British writers, and are very dated. The last comprehensive biography, by Macaulay's nephew G. O. Trevelyan, was published in 1876. In the 500-page book, there is one chapter on Macaulay's years in India, which says little about the India that his actions and policies overlooked altogether. Upto until 2012, when Zareer Masani published his *Macaulay*, there was not a single biography of the man by an Indian<sup>6</sup> – an astonishing fact given the vast galaxy of Indian historians and intellectuals. What this shows, is that if the imperial gaze is returned at all, it does not look closely enough at the other as the other. This oversight leads to inevitable misunderstandings about not only the other, but about one's own self. Masani's account of Macaulay, presents the man as a far-sighted pioneer whose unwavering commitment to administrative and legislative liberalism not only built and consolidated the British imperial reputation for 'fair-play', but was also pivotal, by enabling the spread of the English language, in uniting India. The advantage that the language afforded, Masani claims, has extended well into the global digital era, where it has given millions a 'passport out of poverty.' These claims are seriously exaggerated, especially given that we know that speedy automation and robotisation threaten jobs everywhere, and that a knowledge of English is hardly an insurance anywhere against the peril. Nor, as we also know, has ignorance of the English language inhibited places such as China, Taiwan and South Korea from taking advantage of the opportunities of the global age. And the glaring instance of China's enormous success, in fact, shows that capitalist modernity works smoothest without an 'Anglo-Saxon model' of representative democracy. Such analysis reveals a larger poverty of the contemporary Indian elite imagination, which cannot envision an independent India outside the framework of colonial cognition even 70 years after the end of colonial rule. The newfound prosperity of our class, the educated Indian elite, has brought a kind of cognitive surrender. At one level, it leads to rejection of one's own customs and traditions in an indiscriminate manner, without much reflection or discussion. The language of aspirations has been invented by marketing wizards over the last generation to foreclose any serious reckoning, with what is imposed invisibly by a corporate state in the name of development. Mass culture in the Western world has long been controlled, and continues to be produced, by giant corporations that wield enormous power. The West has been living in a supermarket for a very long

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time. Corporate rule in the Western world has meant a thorough devastation of human society, putting relationships from the most intimate to the most public in jeopardy. Presumably, this is the vision of consumer modernity that India's rulers wish to see realised, a vision in which the global market is the sole arbiter of all values. India's cultural heritage and traditions are part of the collateral damage of this aspiration – as they were in Macaulay's time – and there are many who are happy to see it all go. There is the commercial aggression of globally agile digital and media corporations, ever keen to expand their markets around the world. But there is also a pliant state at the receiving end, which allows them unrestricted access. Alongside them, now we are offered fantasies of an ancient past, when Vedic science and technology supposedly flourished, to mitigate the internal shame and humiliation of a class of elites who have enriched themselves materially while remaining cognitively enslaved in the mental world set in motion by Macaulay. Devy, in *After Amnesia* has argued that in India,

Westernization has brought with it a regressive tendency... of reviving a distant past and repressing the immediate past. This fantasization of the past... and the uneasy relationship with recent history ... are consequences of the cultural amnesia into which Indian culture has regressed during the colonial period. The worst part of the colonial impact was that it snatched away India's living cultural heritage and replaced it with a fantasy of the past. This amnesia, which has affected our awareness of native traditions which are still alive, is perhaps the central factor of the crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Quite contrary to what Masani argues in his biography, vernacular languages have suffered under the onslaught of English. Devy led the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), launched in 2010, which revealed that 250 languages have been lost in postcolonial India – causing a drop in the number of languages spoken in the country from 1,100 to approximately 850 since 1961. If India after globalisation is becoming the 'graveyard of languages,' as Devy says, it has much to do with the longstanding legacy of choices against vernaculars dating back to the days of Macaulay, reinforced by state decisions taken in independent India along similar lines. In his latest book, *The Crisis Within*, Devy has expressed alarm at the cognitive condition of India in the post-liberalisation era. 'The cumulative effect of the rise of English schools in India on Indian languages

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is going to be negative,' he writes. 'That would lead us into difficulties while conceptualising our cultural history. When a large number of such children get into positions of authority, their collective amnesia about cultural history can pave an easy way for false historical narratives and a fascist political environment.'<sup>18</sup>

In an era which has come to see itself as somehow free, empires need ever subtler masks to perpetuate their projects of domination, so that power continues to be misunderstood as freedom. But modern history teaches that freedom is not a gift that the conquerors of history bestow upon their subjects from innate graciousness. It has had to be fought for, with great sacrifices, and even when it has been effectively won, it has had a pronounced tendency to be subtly overtaken by the inertia of earlier imperial domination. In an age in which knowledge and information confer unprecedented power, this amounts to the colonisation of cognition. As we know, cognition precedes not only analysis, but discourse itself. India is triply disadvantaged. As in many other societies, we suffer from the 'head versus hand' hierarchy, which ascribes higher status to purely mental work over work that requires physical labour. In India, that hierarchy is also encoded in caste, with mental labour assigned to dominant castes and physical labour assigned to oppressed ones. Finally, there is the colonial pre-sumption, still largely in place, that fluency in English is a sign of intellectual superiority. These divisions enforce social and knowledge hierarchies. Simply put, most elites do not consider the knowledge that most people possess in contemporary India to be legitimate or deserving of equal standing with formal knowledge.

*The Web of Freedom*,<sup>19</sup> recent intellectual biography of the economist J.C. Kumarappa by the academics Venu Madhav Govindu and Deepak Malghan, is an account of one man's lifelong battle to restore legitimacy and dignity to the knowledge systems of common people. Kumarappa was born in 1892, into an elite Tamil Christian family. He studied at Columbia University, where he was taught by the economist E A Seligman – who also taught BR Ambedkar – and later settled in Bombay as an accountant. Meeting Gandhi and encountering his theories of village economics transformed him. Kumarappa threw himself wholeheartedly into the Gandhian movement, and spent 20 years living in a small hut in Maganvadi, near Wardha, in what is now Maharashtra, from where he coordinated the

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activities of the All India Village Industries Association. Reviving the rural economy was his life's work. He was the only Gandhian on the pre-Independence National Planning Committee, the forerunner of the National Planning Commission. After Independence, he served as the chair of the government's Agrarian Reform Committee. For him swadeshi ideals did not mean replacing English factories with Indian ones, but rather, creating a distributed or decentralised system of production based in villages. Being a trained economist, Kumarappa also produced theoretical arguments in support of village industries and a local economy. He argued that these were crucial to restoring employment, autonomy and dignity to ordinary citizens. According to Govindu and Malghan, 'while Gandhi laid out the broad contours of an argument for swadeshi, it was Kumarappa who out of prolonged engagement shaped it into a theory of decentralization.'<sup>20</sup> After Independence, the prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, advocated large-scale production and the centralisation of resources wherever possible, to be coordinated through the National Planning Commission. Kumarappa took the opposite stance. He advocated small-scale and decentralised production, and large-scale production only when these were not feasible.

The book's detailed accounts of Kumarappa's practices counter a frequently cited criticism of the Gandhian programme – that it advocated primitive methods of production and wanted to turn the clock back to a pre-modern past. In fact both Kumarappa and Gandhi were committed to making improvements in existing techniques of production and methods of organisation, as long, as these stayed consistent with core Gandhian principles. For them, khadi production, spinning on the charkha and decentralised small-scale industries were not to be championed because they were 'traditional,' nor for the sake of preserving 'Indian culture.' Rather, these were ways to generate creative, meaningful work for the vast majority of people, not just for the fortunate few with access to formal education. The strength of Kumarappa's approach lies in the fact that it starts from the majority's position in terms of existing skills and knowledge. It does not ask them to wait decades, or generations, to become formally educated and then get in line for jobs that may never materialise. Kumarappa's economic theory was based on what ecological economists today call 'sustainability,' though he used the term 'permanence.'

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Sustainable approaches in the field of economics do not focus on endless growth in material living standards, but see the human economy as part of nature. They place ordinary farmers, workers and artisans at the centre of economic thought, and favour low-cost, labour-intensive technology with low negative environmental impact, as well as decentralised production. Moreover, they insist that exchange must primarily be local, not only because distance deprives consumers of knowledge about the conditions under which goods are produced, and so aids unethical practices, but also because long-distance transport of daily necessities is ecologically expensive. These same principles can be found in Kumarappa's economic writings and practice. Kumarappa was aiding a social movement that directly challenged the hegemony of text-based knowledge over other, practical forms of knowledge. In so doing, he, like Gandhi, attempted to produce a more inclusive alternative to the centrally-organised industrial production system that the country's post-colonial elite rushed towards. Seventy years ago, only a small minority of Indians had graduate or post-graduate degrees. These were Macaulay's children — they were educated in the colonial way of thought, and emulated it even in dissent. This elite class controlled key economic institutions, such as the National Planning Commission, which determined how resources were to be allocated to shape India's economic future. During the colonial period, Kumarappa had disagreed with fellow members of the National Planning Council on almost all counts, and eventually resigned from the body. After Independence, he was not given a place on the National Planning Commission. *The Web of Freedom* ends with Kumarappa's disillusionment towards the end of his life — he died in 1960 — with both the official inheritors of Gandhi's legacy and the Nehru-led Congress government. Nevertheless, he continued to work towards what is considered the first "knowledge movement" of post-colonial India.

The Gandhian Movement posed a challenge to the hegemony of book-learning as well as colonial hierarchies of knowledge, but that challenge was ultimately defeated by the ruling elite. Opposition to the Gandhian programme also came from 'untouchable' jatis, who were exploited and oppressed on the basis of their occupations, which Brahminical thought deemed impure and polluting. In his debates with Gandhi, BR Ambedkar argued for forsaking the knowledge embedded in undesirable work, and embracing modern education. Ambedkar's leadership and vision

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transformed Indian society, not least in contributing to the emergence of Dalits as an organised political force. But at the same time, seven decades after Independence, most Indians, including Dalits and others from oppressed castes, have not been able to advance through modern education. The hierarchies of knowledge in contemporary India are still structured by hierarchies of caste. *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on the Dalit-Bahujan Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution*, by the political theorist and activist Kancha Ilaiah, launches a fresh attack on caste-based knowledge hierarchies.<sup>21</sup> Ilaiah takes readers on a tour through a prototypical Telugu village, visiting communities that specialise in different occupations traditionally reserved for oppressed castes. Through various chapters, such as ‘Unpaid Teachers’, ‘Subaltern Scientists’, ‘Social Doctors’, ‘Meat and Milk Economists’ and ‘Unknown Engineers’, Ilaiah reveals the complexities of Dalit-Bahujan jati society and knowledge. The village’s inhabitants are highly able specialists who, because they lack formal degrees, are never recognised as such by the rest of society. Unlike in dominant-caste society, here men and women work alongside each other, and women are knowledge-creators and teachers in their own right. Ilaiah exposes the divide between existing forms of Brahminical knowledge, which are written down and therefore legitimised, and the knowledge of the Dalit-Bahujan majority, which is largely transmitted through apprenticeship (through Ustad-Shagird tradition) and not recorded in text. In post-Hindu India, Ilaiah chooses to focus on non-formal systems of knowledge. He argues that the classification of those doing productive work into ostensibly ‘lower’ castes has done much damage to a potentially fruitful relationship between epistemologies rooted in such work and formal knowledge systems. Ilaiah envisions welding together existing and new forms of knowledge, even if he does not offer clear ways for integrating these into university curricula. Noting that the engineering skills of Dalit-Bahujan communities have never been recorded by Brahmin scholars or allowed into textbooks, Ilaiah implies that Indian society would benefit greatly from a dialogue involving these different knowledge systems.

Ilaiah argues that Dalit-Bahujan jatis have been the custodians of scientific thinking in India, a thesis that resonates with our contemporary understanding of the development of technical knowledge in Europe. It is now well-established that in early modern Europe science and

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mathematics were the domain of artisans and manual workers, and that these fields grew in connection with the solving of practical problems. The key inventors of the Industrial Revolution in England, such as James Watt and George Stephenson, were also craftsmen. Craft apprenticeships included training in mathematics, material science and physics. David S. Landes, in his book *The Unbound Prometheus*, argues that craftsmen were not ‘unlettered tinkers’, but possessed sophisticated theoretical knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Pamela Long in *Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400-1600*, states that in early modern Europe, those with university backgrounds engaged in reciprocally beneficial conversations with artisans. In Europe’s courts, workshops and coffee houses, ‘the learned taught the skilled, and the skilled taught the learned.’ This happened because learned individuals valued practical knowledge ‘not only for what it could achieve in the material world, but also as a form of knowledge.’<sup>23</sup> Ilaiah’s book demonstrates that technical knowledge does not exist in a social vacuum, and that mundane occupational practices embody philosophies and worldviews. He describes the activities of farmers, milk producers, weavers, barbers, leather-workers and washerfolk, and then examines the values embedded in these. Instead of a text-based perspective of Indian civilisation, then, Ilaiah offers a tool-based view, which overturns both the dominance of the head over the hand, and of text-based, Brahminical knowledge systems over the epistemologies of the Dalit-Bahujan jatis. At times his conclusions can appear tenuous – as, for instance, when he valorises male dhobis as proto-feminists for working alongside women – and he does not always provide ample evidence to back his claims. But to focus on these aspects of the book would be to miss the wood for the trees. *Post-Hindu India* is a powerful challenge to the Brahminical knowledge structure that denigrates skilled, productive work because it has a manual component or is performed by oppressed castes, and makes the case for a new social imagination based on the knowledge of Dalit-Bahujan jatis.

In the heyday of the anti-colonial movements worldwide, leaders fighting European political domination echoed the need for intellectual deconolisation. During the mid-twentieth century, thinkers such as Gandhi, Kumarappa, and Frantz Fanon argued that freedom from colonial rule required the dismantling of colonial forms of education, and a

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decolonisation of the colonised intellect and imagination. Yet in recent decades, this cognitive project has largely been abandoned, and even post-colonial nations have accepted the hegemony of Western economic and knowledge paradigms. In the twenty-first century, new movements in Latin America have brought intellectual decolonisation to the forefront of their political agenda. The Portuguese scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his new book *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide*, analyses how these movements are trying to bring another world into being. ‘Epistemicide’, as the writer uses it, is the killing of ways of thinking, seeing and doing. According to Sousa Santos, knowledge paradigms of the West – or to use the more recent terminology, ‘the Global North’ – have committed epistemicide across the world.

The book begins with the assertion that the sum of all human understanding of the world far exceeds that of the Western understanding of the world. For Sousa Santos, the intellectual hegemony of the Global North needs to be challenged by the ‘epistemologies of the South,’ which implies that people across the world should use ‘grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory.’ Those in the Global South, he observes, have suffered for generations from a ‘loss of critical nouns.’ We can only qualify what is given to us. If the North’s episteme promotes ‘development’, then the South can only qualify it to create ‘alternative development,’ ‘inclusive development’ or ‘sustainable development.’ If the North promotes ‘democracy’, then the South can only complain that the democracy it has is not ‘decentralised’, ‘radical’ or ‘true’ democracy.<sup>24</sup> Sousa Santos collects and transmits new ‘critical nouns.’ If the Gandhian movement spoke of satyagraha, sarvodaya, swadeshi and swaraj, indigenous peoples’ movements in Mexico, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and elsewhere have brought forward ideas such as Rights of Nature, *pachamama*, or Mother Earth, and *sumak kawsay*, a Quechua (Language spoken in Maya Civilization) word for a life lived in Balance with the non-human environment. In a few cases, these concepts, sometimes as old as the communities they spring from, have been formally acknowledged in constitutions and legal systems. The 2008 constitution of Ecuador and the 2009 constitution of Bolivia both recognise the principle of *sumak kawsay*, for instance, as a goal of society. In real-world terms, this means that their modern legal systems have to recognise the rights of trees and rivers in



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court rulings. There are other symbolic victories as well, such as the granting of official language status to Quechua in Ecuador, and the election of Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president in 2006. In this way, the new Latin American movements have brought epistemic decolonisation back into politics. They have successfully shown how our deep ecological crises and unprecedented economic inequality are also a failure of the imagination. In seeking solutions, they have taken up the task of setting aside borrowed categories and begun thinking for themselves.

What ought to be given the status of knowledge and thus deemed worth studying is a deeply political question for any society. There are few who delved as deeply into it as Ganesh Narayan Devy, who has consistently questioned that terms on which knowledge is produced and consumed. The cornerstone of his work had been an examination of the links between knowledge and power. He wrote in the essay *The Being of Bhasa*: 'The Barbarians don't have knowledge, the Romans have it. Those who speak or recite Sanskrit have knowledge; those who speak Prakrit have no knowledge. Those who speak English have knowledge, those who don't, have no knowledge worth the name. Such is the political context of every knowledge system.'<sup>25</sup> Alienation from bhasa is singularly tragic, Devy argues. With the loss of language, one loses the history of negotiation between that language and the reality from which it had evolved. Therefore the loss of language is the destruction of a system of knowledge.

The PLSI gives us a sense of the scale of India's epistemologies, and yet most educational and professional institutions view knowledge as that, which is generated in the few prominent languages having state recognition. These are languages spoken by a handful of dominant groups. Social structure, language and knowledge are interconnected, Devy points out in his book, *The Crisis Within*. On the social level, a hierarchical view of class, caste and tribes has narrowed down the idea of knowledge. English remains predominant vehicle of knowledge because of the 'continued knowledge imperialism of the west.' Globalisation and the opening up of the International labour market have made a certain kind of knowledge marketable. Since America is the most celebrated site of globalisation, Americanised education holds great value. The answer, accordingly to G.N. Devy, is not just diversity and creating inclusive spaces. Museumising diversity and hybridity would be useless without a

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democratisation of knowledge. The creative interchange between cultures has to take place on a level playing field. In India Devy writes in *The Crisis Within* the marginalised far outnumber the dominant sections of society and the country's mainstream can only be an aggregate of the margins.<sup>26</sup>

To conclude, we must not think that we are doing the marginalised any favours by recognising them. The question of inclusion of the excluded should no longer be seen as a question of grudgingly English giving something because it is politically correct, but rather as an opportunity before us for shaping new fields of knowledge, novel pedagogies and bringing back value to the oral and written wisdom generated in India over millennium, and at the same time a meaningful future for it.

**Endnotes:**

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- <sup>2</sup> K.M. Panikkar, *A Survey of Indian History* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1956), p. 248.
- <sup>3</sup> H. Sharp ed., *Selection from Educational Records, Part-I (1781-1839)*, Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1920. Reprint (Delhi: National Archives of India, 1965), pp. 107-117.
- <sup>4</sup> Sharp ed., *Selection from Educational Records, Part-I (1781-1839)*, 107-117.
- <sup>5</sup> Sharp ed., *Selection from Educational Records, Part-I (1781-1839)*, 107-117.
- <sup>6</sup> Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Goa: Other India Press, 1983).
- <sup>7</sup> Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, pp. 270-342.
- <sup>8</sup> R. Bharathy, 'Sir Thomas Munro's Minute on Education,' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, vol.61, Part One (2000), pp. 1005-1010.
- <sup>9</sup> Bharathy, 'Sir Thomas Munro's Minute on Education,' pp. 1005-1010.
- <sup>10</sup> Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, pp. 89-254.
- <sup>11</sup> Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, pp. 89-254.
- <sup>12</sup> Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, pp. 343-347.
- <sup>13</sup> Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree, Introduction*.
- <sup>14</sup> Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree*, p.348.
- <sup>15</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or the Indian Home Rule (1909): The Gandhian Concept of Self Rule*. <https://www.mk gandhi.org>articles>. Accessed on 09.10.2019.

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- <sup>16</sup> Zareer Masani, *Macaulay: Britain's Liberal Imperialists* (London: Random House, 2012).
- <sup>17</sup> Ganesh Narayan Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literacy Criticism* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2017), p. 146.
- <sup>18</sup> Ganesh Narayan Devy, *The Crisis Within: On Knowledge and Education in India* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017), p.88.
- <sup>19</sup> V.M. Govindu and Deepak Malghan, *The Web of Freedom: J.C. Kumarappa and Gandhi's Struggle for Economic Justice* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup> Govindu and Malghan, *The Web of Freedom*, p.4.
- <sup>21</sup> Kancha Ilaiah, *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse in Dalit-Bahsyian Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution* (New Delhi: Sage, 2009).
- <sup>22</sup> David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 284.
- <sup>23</sup> Pamela Long, *Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Science, 1400-1600* (Oregon: Oregon State University Press, 2011).
- <sup>24</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Lisbon: Routledge, 2014).
- <sup>25</sup> Martand Kaushik, 'The centre can not hold, How G.N. Devy challenges our concept of knowledge', *The Caravan* (July 2018): 85.
- <sup>26</sup> Kaushik, 'The centre can not hold, How G.N. Devy challenges our concept of knowledge', pp. 92-93.