

Indian Higher Education and the Need for Critical Knowledges

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Abstract

The construction of a reflexive modernity calls for people who can look at their own society and correctly identify its greatest challenges. Modernity may be weak and poorly rooted in India but this is precisely why more sensitivity is called for not less. While many of the contradictions created by nineteenth-century industrialisation are surfacing now in India, the risks of late industrial societies are simultaneously making their presence felt. The weakening of social and normative knowledges cannot be said to be a problem restricted to liberal welfare states, it threatens India too. The dangers created by this weakening may take up special forms here, given the small ratio of the educated section in comparison to the rest of Indian society. The demand for critical and human knowledges will never go away. The challenge now is for us to rethink how we can meet that demand.

Keywords

Education, university, sociology, social sciences, humanities, liberalisation

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This article tries to highlight some recent approaches to the innate contradictions within modernity and, through them, to reflect on the ebbing of the humanities and social sciences in Indian academics. At the same time, it also tries to search for rays and pathways of hope.

The knowledges which gain currency in a society are not fully autonomous. We know that economic and political processes intertwine with culture to create and demolish academic disciplines. Adam Smith (1723–90) was a professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University, but is now remembered selectively by economists for his forceful defence of the free market. The moral dimension of his arguments is rarely mentioned at a time when the market is bent by powerful agents to serve their interests. Anthropology saw its heyday in colonial times and still struggles to redefine a core agenda and method. The claim of modern academic disciplines to being the highest forms of knowledge itself is the product of a particular juncture of history. The late medieval university in Europe was primarily a site for the study of theology and law (Rashdall, 1895). The modern university emerged in the nineteenth century with the growing power of non-religious institutions in society. The university was not a puppet of the state, yet, could exist only with the blessings of the government. In several countries like Germany and France, modern universities were created by the direct intervention of the state (Rashdall, 1895). The university's place in society was also cemented when alumni tried to monopolise the struggle for jobs and positions of influence.

Even today, the university manoeuvres to control legitimacy before the state and seeks to deny legitimacy to other forms of knowledge. There can be many ways of reflecting upon society, but curriculum committees and examining bodies decide whether those qualify for certification from a university. Thus, sociology is recognised as a discipline for which a Master of Arts (MA) degree may be awarded. However, that privilege must be struggled for by groups of intellectuals like, say, environmentalists who may have been actively researching and studying social structure, ecology and forms of production and consumption. Knowledges do not exist in isolation and are supported or weakened by their institutional and social dimensions. The University Grants Commission (UGC) must necessarily maintain a list of universities that it does not recognise. Certification and exclusion are processes for

maintaining the legitimacy, prestige and power of university alumni and their knowledges. If the UGC were to certify all claimants, the purpose of the certification would be defeated. Prestige in academics is created by several factors of which one may be the perception of rigour by a peer group, but another is also the regulation of competitors (Collins, 1979). This is not at all to say that all forms of knowledge are as valid as university-certified knowledges and that universities exist only to protect their power and position. However, it must also be acknowledged that what is taught as knowledge in higher education cannot be seen as absolute and pure, untouched by power and social context.

The historicity of knowledge is seen in the way the new universities had given pride of place in Western Europe to the cultural knowledges which emerged after the Renaissance. In spite of the industrial revolution, technical knowledges were still considered inferior in the nineteenth-century university. It was initially only in Germany and the land-grant universities of the United States (US) that professional disciplines and technological researches were made the centres of interest. Martin Trow (2007) has argued, after Weber, that the primary focus of education was to cultivate an orientation and a way of life, rather than technical skills. Most members of the European ruling classes had a cultural and legal education rather than a technical one (Ruegg, 2004). Trow calls this the elite phase of higher education, whose products went on to become some of the most influential and powerful members of society as an elite. They may be internally differentiated but were still relatively sharply distinguishable from the rest of society. At least part of that distinction was created by the cultures of the university. It was as late as the second half of the twentieth century that technology and science came to dominate most universities. Trow sees this in connection with a growing need for technical skills in contemporary societies and describes it as a mass phase, since it led to a significant shift away from a focus on a thin section of elites. While science and technology grows, the cultural knowledges too have been transforming. They are being shaped into forms that powerful actors find useful in organising and controlling the workforce and society at large. When young Ph.D. graduates in English apply for teaching positions, many find that they must turn to professional colleges to get a job. Almost invariably, they are asked in interviews whether they can teach courses on communication to engineers and

managers. There is little appreciation of the contribution that literature may make to the refinement of the mind. Those faculty who aggressively market their courses on management communication are in great favour with college administrations.

The pattern visible in late industrial societies is that of the continued growth of technical–instrumental knowledges and a concurrent decline of other forms. Those pockets of India which are connected to the global market mirror this trend. When universities are told to be relevant, more often than not what is meant is that they should produce more graduates who can fit into the workforce. The market has held in thrall even our National Knowledge Commission, and it focuses primarily on creating ‘human resources’ from the point of view of the economy. It is revealing that disciplines like philosophy and sociology are entirely excluded in its report (National Knowledge Commission, 2008).

The Darker Side of Instrumental Knowledges

The emphasis on utility, of course, need not be an entirely bad thing. As we move towards more complex societies, the rise of technical knowledges is inevitable and necessary. However, there is a darker side to their rise. Max Weber famously outlined it a century ago when he wrote of the rationalisation of the world. We built an iron frame to free ourselves from the constraints of nature and history, he wrote, and then found ourselves in an iron cage instead (Weber, 1958). The pathos of Weber came from his despair that the grasp of the iron cage would eventually close down completely over the human spirit.

Scholars like the early critical theorists, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, have shared this pessimism (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972), but others have been less deferential to what they see as mere nostalgia for the past (Giddens, 1995). Jürgen Habermas saw the future and present as capable of being whatever we chose to make of them. For him, the defining struggle was between what he called the system and the lifeworld (Habermas, 1981a, 1981b, 1996). The lifeworld was the domain of meanings, subjective and shared. It was where what Habermas called communicative action could take place. This was action through dialogue, resting upon relative equality between the participants and upon shared aesthetics, emotions and beliefs. Communicative action had

the possibility of permitting reason, justice and fairness to be grounds for social arrangements. The lifeworld was where this could be worked out. The system, in contrast, was built up of objective forces and walls. It was the domain of strategic action, resting not on dialogue but on reaction and strategic choices in the face of non-negotiables. It was shaped out of social facts and proceeded through much higher degrees of compulsion than experienced in the lifeworld.

There were advantages in having a system on which to base our society. Communicative action all the time, or in larger networks, is slow and time consuming. It calls for bonding, dialogue and a creative exploration of shared meanings. The lifeworld was deeply meaningful but doing things in it in a just manner was laborious and painstaking. However, if just frameworks could be built for strategic action, they could save huge amounts of time and effort in everyday activities. The growing prominence of the system went hand in hand with the rise of technical-instrumental knowledges. The latter helped predict causality and to guide the precise use of force. However, it should never be forgotten that the system had to be just. This normative dimension was what gave it legitimacy. Norms were best worked out not through strategic action, but through communicative action. Norms that were imposed or the result of symbolic violence could hardly be considered legitimate. Indeed, both the lifeworld and strategic action were needed in any given society. However, the legitimacy of the system had to come ultimately from the lifeworld. The loss of their connection led to the system taking up an oppressive and opaque role (Habermas, 1981a, 1981b, 1996).

Drawing from the stated academic tradition, one may argue that the danger posed to late industrial societies by the weakening of the social sciences and humanities is precisely this—the creation of an opaque society. The market and state power embody certain kinds of rationality while several others, too, are possible. Norms may be various, with the market and state being built on only certain out of a large range of possibilities. Institutions and domains do have their own relative autonomies from broad societal processes. However, there is a marked tendency in knowledges to drift towards the interests of the powerful (Beck and Young, 2005). Questions of norms and rationalities that are not consistent with the rationality of the market and large bureaucracies are destabilising and slowly bled away.

The Fissures of a Technical-Instrumental World

Anthony Giddens (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1992) argue that if modern knowledges are too close to the strings of power, then a grave danger looms. Only those problems and consequences will be visible which suit the powerful. However, the invisible threats are of no less consequence even if they have been pushed out of sight. Examples of the consequences of being blind to trouble spots are already around us. We have been witness to the triumphalism of corporate capitalism and a media entranced by its successes. However, neither the corporate czars nor their puppet media and Nobel Prize-winning economists were able to identify or warn us of the fatal flaws which have led to a near collapse of the global economy and thrown millions out of their jobs and homes. In India, we have had a scandal of the magnitude of Satyam Computers, where a handful of managers, accountants and board members seem to have pulled the wool over everyone's eyes. The culture of India's corporate world seems to have norms that discourage critical inquiry of a deeper kind.

Giddens and Beck help us to understand what is happening through their concept of a 'risk society'. Beck (1992) says that the kind of industrialisation which had developed in the nineteenth century is now undergoing fundamental transformation. Familiar concepts like class through which we grasped the tension points of the old industrial societies are no longer as useful as they were in the past. Beck says that a new social structure is struggling to emerge and we, too, are only in the process of developing the concepts which can recognise it and help us to act. What we do see are a series of fissures that reach out across the entire system. In this new risk society, one of the key fissures is created by the growth of science and technology. The technical disciplines have demonstrated enormous capacity to impact our lives. It is in the character of these disciplines that they look at specific, technical features of what they study. However, the most important consequences of science and technology fall outside their own domain and field of vision. The consequences are political, social, cultural and economic, and to understand these, other kinds of disciplines like the social sciences and humanities are needed. Civil engineering, for instance, is ill-equipped to understand what happens to peoples' lives when they are asked to leave to build a big dam over their homes. The civil engineer is taught to

measure the strength of concrete and stone. He has no concepts to measure the pressures and pains of human existence. The disjunction between the highly developed technical knowledges and their inability to grasp their consequences is one of the major generators of risk in technocratic societies.

The technical disciplines no longer have the concept of politics in their professional imaginations. It is, at best, something unsavoury which politicians indulge in, or is a description of the underworld of corporate manipulations. Yet, the very nature of technology is deeply political. When engineers build factories that displace thousands, they are engaged in a political act. The growth of a system of knowledge where people no longer have the categories to understand that they are engaged in political acts, Beck argues, is itself a politics of knowledge.

Giddens (1990) makes a point similar to Beck's, even though he comes to it from a different theoretical background. Giddens argues that the complexity of contemporary societies and their sheer scale is unprecedented. Modernity rests upon several kinds of disembedding among which one is the emergence of a sense of time and space which is not tied to a particular context. It is this which permits communication and collaboration across a global scale. Another of the crucial forms of disembedding is the creation of expert systems. Now, we no longer have to engage at a personal level with different kinds of knowledges. For instance, one no longer needs to know the details of how to build a ceiling to have a house. It is possible to trust an expert whose realm it is to ensure that the roof will not collapse over the resident's head. Trust, Giddens underscores, is at the core of modernity. We cannot fully verify the abilities of the expert so we choose to trust him. However, the emergence of such expert systems may go hand in hand with the suppression of knowledges that do not fit in. This may well lead to a situation where the expert does not have access to information that the materials used in the ceiling are carcinogenic. Risk, Giddens argues, becomes a characteristic feature of modernity, along with trust.

Both Beck and Giddens point out that technocratic societies are sharply vulnerable to systemic risks. The organisation of technical knowledges is based upon the exercise of power in denying other forms of knowledge. However, this leaves them exposed to the risks which emerge from origins beyond their own particular domain. Modernity leads to a monolithic system of dominant knowledges incapable of

responding to problems and issues which come from beyond what these knowledges and expert systems have defined as rationality.

The answer, one must emphasise, is not the abandonment of modernity but the development of a reflexive modernity. Giddens and Beck call this the radicalisation of modernity and argue that it is already taking place. The awareness of risk becomes the basis of a society which is continually reflecting upon itself. Reflexivity permits actions in response that seek to correct modernity's problems and which can overcome its fissures.

Knowledge and Modernity in India

The Indian context is quite different from the liberal welfare democracies of the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany where Giddens, Habermas and Beck situated their work. Here, modernity itself is still struggling to assert itself against social forces which understand domination but mistrust reason. Reflexivity is an even more distant, weak process. With the majority of Indians struggling to make both ends meet, the perception of risks from the environment is often an unaffordable luxury. Where Habermas saw the state threatening to choke communicative action, here, most often, it is the non-functional or weak state that one encounters. While reading theorists of modernity, one must weigh with caution their applicability to India.

The proponents of modernisation theories had reassured themselves with an ideology of progress and evolution (Parsons, 1982) that Western institutional forms were an inevitable next step in a universal scheme of historical development. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) have weighed against using modernity as a framework from which to examine India. As Chakrabarty has argued, in disciplines like history, there has been a tendency to see a linear trajectory which measures countries like India primarily in terms of how far they fall behind Europe. This narrative of modernity, such post-colonial scholars have argued, is neither necessary nor desirable. Their earlier writings have concerned themselves with a clearer understanding of the Europe-centred character of modernity. However, in later works, they have acknowledged that modernity remains the key to the future (Chakrabarty, 2000a; Chatterjee, 1997). With many others, they have affirmed that what they seek is still a modernity, albeit an alternative one.

As Chakrabarty puts it, this aims to provincialise the putative universal vision of Europe (Chakrabarty, 2000b).

Today, we are unable to claim that modernity takes the same form everywhere, or the same institutional structure, or even that it is inevitable and predestined. At the same time, modernity continues to have an appeal to the extent that it refers to clarity of thought and communication as the way to find answers rather than through the authority of powerful social groups and institutions. Modernity cannot be taken for granted. It struggles uphill in countries like India where old and new social formations jostle for the control of resources and cultures. Protected spaces for reason and dialogue are few and vulnerable. The state in post-colonial India has had small centres of modernity (often of contested interpretations) and a large hinterland where modern institutions negotiate and strike compromises with other social processes.

The higher education which we see in universities, engineering colleges and management institutes follows the logic and patterns of Western educational institutions. Like modernity, these too have a weak foothold on our soil. While there were several sources of an Indian modernity, hardly any of them got institutionalised within the university system. Avijit Pathak (1998), along with several others, argues that in their own way, Gandhi, Tagore and Aurobindo were also seeking a vision of modernity. In post-Independence India, there was a fresh thrust to develop personnel for the Nehruvian vision of India. The most attractive knowledges and the most feasible models of institutions for communicating and creating them came from developed countries. Indian institutions carried forward versions of knowledge that drew directly from sources in London and New York rather than Gandhian Wardha and the teachings of Aurobindo in Auroville. While there continue to be attempts like Dalit studies and feminism to break into new discourses that express the life experiences of the underprivileged, the former remains a subaltern in the university system and the latter is tolerated only in metropolitan regions.

The degree of inequality in access to higher education has been extremely high in India. As late as 2005–06, the gross enrollment ratio (GER) of young people between the age group 18–24 years was just 11.6 per cent (Ministry of Human Resource Development, n.d.). In contrast, most developed economies had a GER of over 80 per cent (United Nations, n.d.). There has been a huge gulf between the educated with

access to the emerging economy and state institutions and the uneducated who were left out.

Even within the educated, there are sharp social differences. The basic form of social stratification embedded in Indian higher education was much the same as in West Europe before the Second World War. There were a few elite universities from which the managerial classes that ran the Indian state and big industry emerged. These were primarily a handful of metropolitan universities like Delhi, Allahabad, Kolkata, Madras and a very few others. The social and political elites may have been influenced by class, caste and patriarchal interests but it was still largely made up by those who had had a cultural rather than a technical education. This, too, was close to the pattern of social and political elites one sees in Western Europe and America in the nineteenth century and till relatively late in the twentieth century.

One early exception in India to the pervasiveness of a cultural education among the elites before the 1970s came with the setting up of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). The original intention of the IITs, now covered by the dust of the ages, was to create the engineers who would build Nehru's temples of modern India. The disappearance of that objective from the IITs is instructive of the changing balance of power in India. Instead of looking towards service of the Nehruvian nation, the compass of middle-class students swung towards other poles. They soon began to focus on going abroad, then on joining the corporate sector, especially information technology (IT) companies, and in recent years, IIT students have declared investment banking to be the most prized destination. To place their impact, it must be remembered that they were a very tiny section of India. For many years, the IITs were few and far in between, producing less than a couple thousand graduates a year. At least part of their prestige came from the scarcity of their graduates when compared to the size of India.

The overall size of higher education in India was very small, but within it, the weaker universities and colleges vastly outnumbered premier universities and institutes. What was true of the rest of India's modern institutions was also true of India's higher education: there were a few centres of excellence, committed to modernity; the rest were a mass of struggling and failed institutions. In most of the latter, only a ritual of teaching subjects like sociology and political science was maintained. Across India, we saw English literature being taught in

Hindi, Tamil, etc. Here and there, we can see courageous teachers struggle to keep a vibrant intellectual current going, but they are the minorities within their colleges and universities. A sharp stepping down of rigour and commitment towards reflection and questioning is seen when one moves away from a few centres. In many of Kanpur's colleges, for instance, a visitor will find hardly any classroom teaching taking place. Teachers and students say that young people who are holding down full-time jobs enrol in thousands in these colleges, knowing that they do not need to attend any classes and that they will still eventually collect a degree in sociology after just a few hours of mugging, supplemented, if necessary, by mass cheating. This is a picture true of most of India—north, south, east and west.

But even all this seems about to change. The decline of the social sciences and humanities at both the most privileged and the most dysfunctional ends of the system is evident. And I will argue that not all the passing of the old deserves to be mourned.

Behind the basic changes taking place has been the changing balance of power in India, with the gradual growth of the corporate sector, especially after 1991. After 'liberalisation', jobs in the state sector stagnated, while those in the corporate and informal sectors grew. One consequence of this was a drastic alteration of priorities in higher education among the upper sections of Indian society. The economic and prestige returns from participation in the developed economies far outstripped most of what the Indian economy could offer. One possibility became that of studies, and eventually immigration, abroad. While no studies are available for this with respect to the upper classes, anecdotal evidence suggests that a high number of their young began to study in foreign educational institutions. Another possibility was working within the growing private formal sector at technical and managerial jobs. The number of people in regular employment in the public sector decreased over a span of 15 years from 19.1 million in 1991 to 18.2 million in 2006 (National Sample Survey Organisation, n.d.) The numbers in private employment in firms employing more than 10 people went from 7.7 million in 1991 to 8.8 million in 2006. This went alongside the spurt in private technical and management education institutions.

In 2006, there might have been a total of 27 million in government and private firms, but that was still only a tiny fraction of working people within a total population of about a billion people. The small size of

India's formal sector magnified the impact of this shift. One effect has been to drastically decrease elite participation in the social sciences and humanities within India. We are now seeing people getting admission to central universities who come from substantially different class and caste backgrounds than the previous generations of students, which, of course, is not at all a bad thing to happen. However, many faculty members from relatively privileged backgrounds see this as a negative trend. The composition of the faculty, too, has changed, with all major universities complaining about how difficult it is to attract 'quality' faculty. Within departments of social science and humanities, there is a distinct air of demoralisation and of feeling that one is no longer relevant. Part of this is because the new knowledges of power are so obviously something else. But the decline of state support, too, is a factor and it has some independent roots.

The moralities of the state moved emphatically away in the 1990s from choices guided by political and ideological concerns to choices made by the 'invisible' hand of the market. We are told continuously by administrators and heads of institutions that the research which matters is that which articulates with the market. Studies of consumer behaviour draw large projects and make the university administration happy, while studies of farmer poverty languish for lack of support. Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj University at Kanpur has an Institute of Business Management which now offers six different Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) and Master in Business Administration (MBA) programmes. However, this university has no Departments of History, Sociology or Political Science.

The growth of the market need not always lead to the same consequences. The rise of the small and medium bourgeoisie in England had been the backbone for the struggle for a liberal democracy, and the rise of these classes had been accompanied by an ideology of science and reason. In India, we cannot say that the same process is being repeated. Big industry has been the major beneficiary of liberalisation, with smaller entrepreneurs still suffering a licence raj quite similar to the old (Bardhan, 2009). The modernity being cultivated in Indian higher education under the impact of those interests is undoubtedly growing in size and impact. But it also displays a withdrawal from the social and philosophical breadth of vision which characterised its earlier avatar of state socialism. Instead what are promoted are the technical knowledges of management,

organisational psychology and industrial economics. These disciplines embed a system of power that promotes certain questions over others. The MBAs and engineers from the topmost institutions usually fail to comprehend issues beyond those to which they have been exposed. When confronted by a Singur or a workers' agitation, their responses range from irritation to embarrassment. Trained to be good employees, questioning the system is a transgression of their corporate ethics. Even when some of them wish to engage with the grave social problems they see around them, they are hobbled by the narrowness of their education. The decline of critical systemic theorising at elite levels portends trouble for that same system in coming years.

At the other end of the spectrum—the higher education available in small *mofussil* towns—the fraud that was being conducted in the name of teaching sociology and political science is also beginning to lose some of its steam. As Professor Yogendra Singh once said in a public lecture, whenever a community would demand education and opportunities, the easiest solution for the elected representatives and state bureaucracy would be to set up an 'Arts College'. They needed hardly any investment and since they were unconnected to any job-yielding technical proficiency, hardly any regulation was called for. Millions of young people got degrees in sociology, political science and so on without imbibing any of the potential inherent in these disciplines. These subjects are still popular amongst certain classes because one hardly needs to attend college and can get a degree while also being a full-time worker. However, the proliferation of self-financed colleges has made technical degrees much easier to obtain. The Acharya Nagarjuna University and Krishna University in Andhra Pradesh reported large numbers of unfilled postgraduate seats (Samdani, 2010). For the 24 seats in MA (Sociology), Acharya Nagarjuna University was able to get only one student. Of course, given the poor quality of social science education in our country, one wonders if this decline is altogether a bad thing to happen.

The scale of the change is dramatic. In states like Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, there has been a mushrooming of self-financed engineering colleges. In Andhra Pradesh, there were more than 182,000 seats in engineering colleges in 2010, of which over 55,000 went unfilled (*The Times of India*, 2010). A broadly similar pattern is seen in Uttar Pradesh. Virtually anyone with a passing knowledge of science, and whose family

could borrow about Rs 60,000 a year, could walk up and occupy a seat in an engineering college. For those who could not pay that amount, apart from the usual reservations, the Uttar Pradesh government would reimburse the fees of all students whose parents declared they had an income of less than Rs 1 lakh per annum. Thus, almost everybody who was likely to have the personal skills and social background to do even moderately well in science at school would acquire a technical degree. For the rest, there were also degrees in commerce and management.

What we are seeing at a sociological level is, first, a relative expansion in opportunity in comparison to the past. Where 20 years earlier it was very difficult to get admission into an engineering college, today, in several states of India, that is no longer a constraint. To be sure there are bottlenecks and strata within engineering graduates. But at a systemic level, opportunity does appear to have increased. Second, unlike any time in the past, the majority of the future service class would possess a technical education and not a cultural one. The contribution of their higher education to the political and social vision of this section would be of a very narrow kind. It may be argued that earlier, too, the weakness of institutions had also made the humanities and social sciences ineffectual. However, that was not true at elite levels in the past. Now, the nature of the social and political elite itself is changing.

As an illustration, consider the case of the Uttar Pradesh Technical University (UPTU) which was the nodal university till 2009 for all the engineering courses in Uttar Pradesh. The cultural education it offered in that year to its undergraduates in even the best of its colleges is illustrative. When a student joined BTech in Civil Engineering, the discipline which educates builders of public roads and dams, in the first two semesters, there was half a course on 'Environment and Ecology' along with a mandatory course on 'Professional Communication' (UPTU, 2008a). After that, till the end of their degree, there was only a course on Industrial Economics and another on Principles of Management (which seems to be optional) (UPTU, 2008b). This half a course on environment and ecology was supposed to provide an adequate socialisation into political and civic morality for our engineers. Little can be expected of even the highest rated institutions in the state. On top of it, most professional colleges in Uttar Pradesh pay very little and have a body of demoralised and weakly trained faculty. It should not come as a surprise when the

graduates from such a system across the country demonstrate complete ignorance of basic issues.

Habermas in *Towards a Rational Society* (1970) points out that there are several expectations from a university in contemporary times. One was that it reproduce and advance the technical knowledges on which the economy rested. Alongside this, there was also the learning of cultures of work, for instance, the values and orientations upon which the work of the medical professional rests. The university, thus, whether in terms of technical or cultural knowledges, was closely associated with work and the economy. However, this did not exhaust the role of a university in society. It must include, said Habermas, another key role which was the reproduction, elaboration and criticism of a society's culture. Societies have systems of meanings which circulate through a variety of cultural sites like films, magazines, kitty parties and pubs. They are more numerous and broader in scope than work and are no less important in their impact on human life. An important aspect of higher education is to participate and reflect upon those meanings. The job of universities does not stop here either. The cultural domain includes learning how to participate in the political system. A key aspect of university life must be to teach about power and its dynamics. Young people must learn about what processes drive decision making in our society, must learn to reflect upon them and to participate in them. This is no less a part of the university's functions than initiating students into the economy. A university has the advantage of bringing to politics a spirit of reflection. The alternatives include leaving political education to what audiences get from agencies like the print and electronic media, paths fraught with danger.

By failing to develop a serious engagement of higher education with culture—political as well as non-political—we are creating a certain kind of 'educated' Indian. Educated wage labour is making up a growing proportion of India's population with the decline of agriculture and rise of urban employment. The culture of this section will have many consequences for the future of India. It is they who will have access to technology and it is from them that supervisory and managerial positions will be filled.

At present, too many from the professional and supervisory classes seriously believe that the main danger to India comes from politicians and democracy. These classes feel more and more frustrated in their

efforts to influence public life, but still are reluctant to engage with debates on the nature and processes of democracy. If these middle classes tend to opt out of a political system, among the consequences are an even greater loss of legitimacy for the processes of power.

For any political system to function without violence, it must have at least some minimum degree of justice and the people must have a level of faith in it. We see the absence of these all around us in the form of more and more recourse to violence and social disruption as ways to resolve issues and seek benefits. Little faith remains in the machinery of the state to guarantee fairness or justice. Instead only pressure and protest are believed to work. While violence in our polity is due to many reasons, the withdrawal from informed reflection by upper wage labour only exacerbates it. Conversely, it is also the educated wage labour and professional who has the possibility of bringing to bear the accumulated wisdom of history. It is through learning and access to academia that one is spared the effort of having to reinvent the wheel every time. Or having to discover the evils of fascism only by personal experience of what happens when a society closes its mind. An education suitable only to creating good technical employees for corporations is inadequate for creating good citizens for a modern democracy.

The Struggle to Expand Space for Critical Knowledges

With the decline of the social sciences and humanities, our ability to imagine alternative forms of human existence also decreases. It was these disciplines which taught us that human possibilities were linked to history and to social structure. Their decline ensures that there are progressively fewer spaces for critical reflection on many key issues. Most adults now have no opportunity to study them post-schooling. The school, however, has its own reluctance to engage with larger issues and controversies. The study of political and social processes is mostly reduced to memorising the rules of institutions. Controversies and debates are embarrassing for those who run Indian schooling. Even there, it is most convenient and causes less trouble with the powerful to simply focus on rules, maths and physics, and ignore larger human questions of justice and freedom. The general trend is the same as that seen in modern

institutions worldwide: a preference for technical knowledges that lead to individualisation, a loss of social and historical imaginations and an increasing ignorance of basic human processes.

For instance, consider the way we teach about the social and political arrangements needed for a good society in school textbooks. This is the central issue around which rotate at least 2,500 years of debate, struggle and revolution. It is what Plato and Aristotle wrote about, as did Gandhi and Marx. It is intricately tied to the struggle for power and conflicts between classes and interest groups. However, most teachers and the educational bureaucracy reduce this to a bland recital of procedures and rules—rules for elections, rules for the formation of the government and so on. There is no resonance with Gandhi's insistence that freedom calls for developing our own ability to control and harness ourselves. There is no link with the loss of freedom which happens to workers when they lose control of their labour. Aristotle's warnings against giving too much power to any single group or individual seem to have never been made. The issues and debates disappear; all that remains are rules. The reasons for this are obvious. To talk of anything more is to talk of politics and that invites the ire of superiors and the education ministry. There is hardly any professional group of educationists which can stand between the ministry and the school. In a country with millions of computer programmers, very few scholars exist with the authority to insist on a proper approach to school education. It is hardly surprising then that most textbooks are written in an insipid, bloodless tone, devoid of any contentious issues, as if there exist no interests in society and all that is to be seen around us is the result of a hidden but benign disposition.

The changing face of knowledge in our society increases the threat to reason and freedom. At this juncture, there is an urgent need for the social sciences and humanities to ask themselves difficult questions about their relevance to society. The first frontier is that of rethinking the content of the social sciences. It is from within us that there must emerge a new form of knowledge that speaks to the hearts and minds of the people, free from the guiding channels of commerce and domination. An important aspect would be the fusion of normative and empirical knowledges. It is futile to teach sociology without a political and ethical trajectory to it. If one studies caste, one must also ask what purpose it had in the past and what kind of society we wish to build in the future.

Jürgen Habermas (1990) had argued that critical knowledges gave a self-consciousness about one's contexts and about the forces which constrained one's consciousness and life. Characteristic of engaging with critical knowledges was that through that very process of engagement, emancipation was initiated. Habermas had seen feminism and psychoanalysis as excellent examples of such knowledges. By studying how gender identities are constructed, one's own identity and practices are transformed. Similarly, it becomes possible for children to study media processes and begin to see through the roles and images created by television, as has been attempted in the Class 7 textbook of the National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) post-2005 rethinking of its school social science (NCERT, 2007). It is also possible for management and engineering students to study the new class structure emerging under contemporary capitalism and how this creates their individualism, while at the same time making them moral cowards, discouraging them from challenging formal authority.

Which brings us to the second frontier, that of building new institutional spaces for this new social science. Most of the old undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are fading rapidly. It is essential to create viable support systems that protect their graduates from the vagaries of domination through the market. There are many knowledges of which only a few proponents will be able to hold full-time jobs, but which are necessary for a society. The study of gender and class domination are cases in point. Such knowledges have to be supported by institutions and mechanisms that do not work through the logic of the monetary market.

At the same time, we have to find niches within the institutions of the new technological society where we can continue to speak truth to power. At present, we try to teach critical knowledges on a full-time basis to young people consumed with anxiety about their employability. It is only to be expected that they will not be able to develop a commitment towards these disciplines. By contrast, when made available alongside the security of a vocational education, students demonstrate a fascination for larger philosophical and social questions. The humanities and social sciences are taught in the IITs and the immense popularity of those courses (when taught well) is evidence of this. An institutional format that may have potential for the future is exemplified by the IITs which

insist on compulsory humanities and social sciences courses for all undergraduates. They understand that these courses give students something which their science and technology courses cannot. Engineering and management colleges are growing and we must press for the incorporation of similar courses there, too.

However, there is a vast audience which the critical academic disciplines completely overlook. As people grow older and experience more of the vicissitudes of modern life, they ask more penetrating political and sociological questions. It is at the older and more mature student that we must aim at. That is where we will find the greatest receptivity and the richest, most fertile soil. This calls for a serious rethinking of institutional formats. We have hitherto sought easy targets in the young. But now, we will have to work out what kind of courses men and women in their late twenties and thirties and above can attend. Perhaps the way out is to have a series of part-time modular courses instead of the old, full-time undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. People who work in factories and offices can find evening and weekend courses on flower decoration and photography in big cities. Why not courses on understanding and overcoming discrimination? We can also have these courses as part of the vocational degrees, as in the IITs. Subsequently, we can gradually stream the more serious and involved students into more thorough programmes.

There have been many encouraging attempts in India to build such systems of reflection and a modernity which is supple and responsive. In terms of content, we have had innovative social science textbooks by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Eklavya and very recently, by the NCERT too. The NCERT political science textbooks of Classes 9–12 are a good illustration of how larger questions can return to Indian education. They depict democracy in all its glory and all its ugliness. Democracy is not the rules of the Parliament, but the struggles over issues and policies that occur in this institution. Several factors led to this fresh approach being taken. One of them was that for the first time, there was a sizeable number of committed social scientists who used their professional reputation to balance the watering down tendencies of the bureaucrats. Professionalisation creates a pressure group of its own in society. There are indeed grounds for hope where concentrations of scholarship go beyond a certain threshold. This lesson may be constructively applied at many other sites.

Another institutional format is seen in what was developed jointly by several NGOs like Eklavya, Digantar, Vidya Bhawan and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences for a Master's programme in elementary education. It is an example of how to overcome the problem of educating interested people who had their own lives and careers to follow. It was aimed at highly committed teachers and activists who wished to learn while also continuing with their regular work. This programme sought a solution through a mix of online and classroom teaching. There are many more such experiments taking place in India today.

The construction of a reflexive modernity calls for people who can look at their own society and correctly identify its greatest challenges. Modernity may be weak and poorly rooted in India, but that is precisely why more sensitivity is called for not less. The fissures created by the weakening of social and normative knowledges threaten India too, and cannot be said to be a problem restricted to liberal welfare states. While many of the contradictions created by nineteenth century industrialisation are surfacing now in India, the risks of late industrial societies, too, are making their presence felt. Those dangers may take up special forms here, given the small ratio of highly educated elites in comparison to the rest of Indian society. The demand for critical and human knowledges will never go away. The challenge now is for us to rework how we can meet it.

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