

Empirical Experiences in Indian Academia: Caste, Language, and Social Theory

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Abstract

This paper examines the structural barriers to knowledge production and theoretical discourse in Indian academia, focusing on the intersections of caste, language and social theory. It argues that India's pluralistic society suffers from deep linguistic and epistemic inequalities, where dominant languages and Western-centric theories marginalise indigenous forms of knowledge rooted in folk traditions and the lived experiences of disadvantaged communities. Drawing on the work of prominent theorists such as Gopal Guru, Sundar Sarukkai and Raghurama Raju, this study critiques the continued exclusion of empirical knowledge from marginalised groups and calls for the democratisation of intellectual discourse. The paper highlights the need to validate empirical knowledge, recognise local languages and integrate indigenous epistemologies into mainstream social sciences to achieve a truly inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Keywords: Empirical knowledge, Language, Social theory, Caste and Glocal knowledge.

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Introduction

India's socio-cultural landscape is shaped by pluralism, caste structures, and deep historical layers, where language, culture, and caste are not just carriers of discourse or tradition but also powerful tools of power relations, social memory, and knowledge production (Bourdieu, 1991). India's thousands of dialects and folk traditions preserve the multivocality and experiential knowledge of society and shape the identity and historical memory of communities that have often been marginalized in formal historiography and discourse of dominant languages (Spivak, 1988). Indigenous languages and folk literature are not just literary genres but also important tools of social justice, collective identity, self-respect, and resistance. For instance, the oral traditions of potters, blacksmiths, acrobats, weavers, and dancing-singing ethnic groups keep alive their artisanship, natural music, aesthetics, and creations, as well as their historical struggles and questions of cultural identity- all of which are rarely reflected in formal and centralized intellectual discourse (Bhabha, 1994). They have the potential to challenge power structures through experiential reality, folk knowledge, and symbols (Gramsci, 1971).

Thus, language is not just a means of communication but also a tool for maintaining the stability of power and inequality (Bourdieu, 1991). Historically, hegemonic traditions and colonial policies have privileged certain languages and literatures, while large sections of the country that are not linguistically empowered, i.e., those who do not have an institutional grammar to tell their folk tales, have their "folk traditions" dismissed as "unscriptural" (Omvedt, 2004). This inequality exists within the intellectual institutions of the country as well as globally, where for sections that have a storehouse of empirical knowledge, this is a double inequality that they feel in their folk tales and narratives.

Gramsci's (1971) theory of 'cultural hegemony' explains how the dominant class establishes its ideas as the normal "truth," and indigenous folk literature and languages challenge this authority and present alternative ideas. Gopal Guru (2002) challenges the deep intellectual inequality that treats the experiences of marginalized communities as mere 'data' while the power to analyze, reflect, and theorize is relegated to the upper castes. This division not only makes the process of knowledge production one-sided but also signals to communities unfamiliar with formal language or grammatical structures that their experiences are not worthy of any theoretical scrutiny. Guru questions who we consider 'intellectuals' and whose statements are classified as 'knowledge' versus 'story.' Similarly, Spivak's (1988) "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raises the question of whether marginalized communities can tell their own stories through their own language and symbols, or will they always be represented by the dominant class?

In this scenario of language and culture, the democratization of intellectual discourse is not just a question of institutional diversity, but there is also a need to decentralize the process of knowledge production, its language, and its form (Appadurai, 1996). From this perspective, democratization of intellectual discourse is an essential step towards social justice and historical re-reading for Indian society. This means that the experiential knowledge of marginalized communities, their folk languages, and traditions are not given the same legitimacy in theoretical discourse as formal academic knowledge (Spivak, 1988). This critique is not limited to the

boundaries of academic discourse but demands a just, sensitive, and inclusive restructuring of knowledge. This analysis of language, culture, caste, and diversity in the Indian indigenous perspective emerges as a powerful intellectual project towards the democratization of knowledge, critique of power relations, and social justice, which places the plurality of Indian society at the center of intellectual discourse (Bhabha, 1994).

Language Barriers

In Indian society, where linguistic multiplicity and social inequality are historically intertwined, language itself functions as a powerful power structure in the study of social theory. The relationship between language and social theory is not just a matter of academic discourse but is deeply intertwined with complex processes of knowledge production, social justice, and intellectual access. This situation becomes particularly complex when attempts are made to apply Western social theory, which was originally constructed in a different historical and linguistic context to the Indian academic context (Bourdieu, 1991). Western social theory, such as the works of Foucault, Habermas, or Bourdieu, is often written in dense and abstract language, requiring a special kind of cultural capital to understand complex ideological structures. This capital is possessed primarily by students who come from socio-economically strong backgrounds and whose early education was in a dominant language such as English (Bourdieu, 1991). On the other hand, for students coming from rural, OBCs, Dalit, tribal, and other marginalised communities, whose mother tongue is Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, or other regional languages, this abstractness and linguistic complexity of the theory poses an additional barrier.

This linguistic inequality is not just a problem of translation but part of the historical process of power and domination that established certain languages, especially English as the central languages of knowledge production and academic discourse during the colonial period and beyond (Spivak, 1988; Gramsci, 1971). Especially in the countries that were European colonies, a class of local people was formed who knew their language, and they became part of the new ruling class of power change and knowledge production. As a result, communities that do not have proficiency in English not only find it difficult to understand theoretical texts but also gradually get excluded from the mainstream of intellectual discourse. The abstractness of social theory and the power of language hold special significance in the Indian context, as students here come from not only linguistic but also caste, class, and cultural diversities. Understanding social theory is not only an ideological challenge for them but also requires a cultural adaptation, in which it is necessary to relate Western concepts to Indian social reality (Appadurai, 1996) because the dominance of language determines the share of power and wealth of a class or a country.

In this context, the Indian society, which is made up of complex social structures, is the big question here, whereas it is not so big in other European countries. Because, due to the colonial background, the English language became the language of the ruling class here. During the freedom movement, the language of knowledge production was always the regional language, but after independence, the language of social sciences in universities became English. But in India, the change had just begun, where many kinds of socio-political and cultural changes were taking place, and the breakdown of dialogue in the middle was extremely disappointing. Therefore, gradually there was no dialogue between social studies and the university with the common people, whereas in the western countries, there was probably no need for this dialogue, because the phase of change in society had ended there and stability had come to the society.

Historically, deprived and marginalized groups in Indian society have lacked access to the dominant languages and formal social science genres necessary for articulating their lived experiences of humiliation, exploitation, and social marginalization. The dominant academic social science language, largely inherited from colonial English, was neither accessible nor adequate to capture the nuanced realities of these communities (Bourdieu, 1991; Spivak, 1988). Consequently, alternative narrative forms such as folk tales, proverbs, oral histories, and literary genres played a critical role in expressing the cultural memory and social suffering of the oppressed (Omvedt, 2004; Jha, 2017). Writers like Phanishwar Nath Renu, Munshi Premchand, Rahi Masoom Raza, and Tulsiram emerged as important voices in this literary movement, using vernacular and accessible language to convey social realities often neglected by official historiographies or academic discourses (Natarajan, 1996; Varma, 2005). These literary efforts exemplify the potential of literary genres to articulate subaltern experiences, serving as sites of resistance and cultural assertion.

From a political perspective, socialist leaders such as Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia and Karpoori Thakur vehemently opposed the dominance of English, viewing it as a linguistic tool that entrenched colonial hierarchies and disenfranchised indigenous knowledge traditions (Lohia, 1967). Their critiques foregrounded the need to valorize India's linguistic diversity and indigenous epistemologies in socio-political discourse and knowledge production. This tension has given rise to divergent intellectual positions: one group advocating for the indispensability of English as a global academic language but also emphasizing inclusivity of marginalized knowledge; the other prioritizing English exclusively, often sidelining indigenous experiences and epistemologies in theoretical frameworks (Gupta, 2014).

Traditional artisan communities such as carpenters, blacksmiths, and potters exemplify the rich empirical knowledge embedded in craft and folk science, ranging from architectural principles and metallurgy to ecological understanding and cultural symbolism

(Arnold, 1977; Chaudhuri, 2001). For instance, a carpenter's expertise in Vastu Shastra and design principles was foundational to Indian architecture; a blacksmith's metallurgical practices represent indigenous technical knowledge deeply connected to ecological and social processes; and potters are custodians of culturally significant arts entwined with ritual and environment (Gupta & Sharma, 2013). Unfortunately, these knowledge systems often lack formal grammatical or institutionalized linguistic structures, resulting in their marginalization from dominant epistemic frameworks (Spivak, 1988; Bourdieu, 1991). This points to a critical epistemological challenge: the universal validity of knowledge should be questioned without outright rejection, recognizing that each society develops its own forms of knowledge, philosophy, and theory to solve its problems (Appadurai, 1996).

The broader philosophical question emerges as to why social studies, heavily reliant on Western languages and epistemologies, should be considered the sole arbiters of valid knowledge. Could indigenous philosophy and epistemology offer alternative criteria for universality and theory building? Recognizing creativity as a universal human quality, it follows that diverse civilizations, including those lacking institutional languages in social science, have contributed unique knowledge and theoretical perspectives essential to humanity's collective understanding (Nandy, 1983). To dismiss non-institutionalized knowledge traditions solely because they lack formal language structures risks perpetuating intellectual domination and epistemic injustice. Hence, expanding the definition and acceptance of valid knowledge to include oral, folk, and indigenous forms is crucial for a truly inclusive, pluralistic social theory.

Social Theory Barriers

Social theory though the foundation of sociology and other social sciences, often creates deep apprehension and hesitation in students. The abstractness and complexity of theory can be a huge barrier, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds. For some students, studying social theory is reminiscent of their earlier struggles with a difficult and abstract subject like mathematics, where conceptual thinking and cultural capital are required to understand formulas and rules. My own academic journey too, from grappling with mathematics to grappling with abstract theoretical texts of Western scholars like Foucault and Freud, was marked by a deep sense of intellectual alienation, where the language of theory seemed like an impenetrable wall.

The difficulty students face in engaging with social theory is not limited to its abstractness. It is also deeply connected to the linguistic and cultural layers in which theory is constructed. Works are often written in a specific academic dialect that requires a particular cultural context and prior knowledge to be understood, a point highlighted by Pierre Bourdieu (1991). To fully grasp this issue, it is essential to understand the origins of modern social studies. While traditions of studying society existed globally, modern social studies developed primarily in the Western world. There are three important dimensions of this historical development to consider. The most significant is colonialism, which profoundly affected the relationships between societies, establishing a dynamic of exploiter and exploited. This colonial influence is a crucial dimension in the origin and development of social studies, and its effects can still be seen in its form. The theoretical frameworks that emerged from this era often reflect the perspectives and interests of the colonizing powers, making them difficult for those from formerly colonized societies to relate to, as their own histories and cultures are either ignored or presented through a Eurocentric lens.

Satish Deshpande is a contemporary Indian sociologist known for his work on caste, class, and social inequality in post-liberalization India. His core idea revolves around the concept of "exclusive inequalities", arguing that while a new urban, middle-class society appears to be based on merit and individual achievement, it is structured by subtle, invisible caste privileges (Deshpande, 2003). He challenges the common belief that caste is a relic of the past, arguing instead that it has transformed. For Deshpande, upper-caste individuals have the unique privilege of being "casteless" as their caste identity is seen as the norm. This allows them to benefit from inherited social and cultural capital, like better schooling, family networks, and cultural fluency that directly translates into success in competitive fields like higher education and professional jobs (Deshpande, 2012). In essence, Deshpande's work demonstrates how meritocracy in India is not a level playing field but is deeply skewed by unacknowledged, historical caste advantages. He reveals how a seemingly modern, class-based society continues to be shaped by old caste hierarchies.

The challenges of social theory in India are multifaceted, extending beyond mere abstractness to encompass deep-seated linguistic and cultural barriers. These issues are exacerbated by the dominance of a specific academic dialect, often English, which creates a significant obstacle for students from rural, tribal, or Dalit backgrounds who primarily speak regional languages. This barrier is not merely linguistic; it is fundamentally intertwined with the caste-based hierarchies and historical exclusion that have shaped Indian society. Kori and Asagi (2025) Historically, communities with access to dominant languages like Sanskrit, Persian, and later English, also gained control over academic knowledge production. In contrast, the linguistic traditions of marginalized communities were largely oral, leading to their knowledge being delegitimized as "folk" or "illegitimate" (Guru, 2002). This systemic exclusion results in a profound disconnect: when marginalized students attempt to link their personal experiences, local languages, and cultural symbols to theoretical frameworks, they find those frameworks are already structured by dominant perspectives (Gramsci, 1971). Consequently, these students experience a dual alienation. They feel disconnected from the language of academia and simultaneously feel that their lived experiences are not considered valid sources of knowledge within theoretical discourse. This environment often reduces the teaching and learning of theory to a classroom exercise of abstract concepts, detached from the local realities and empirical

contexts from which true intellectual understanding can arise (Gramsci, 1971; Dirks, 2001; Spivak, 1988).

This situation further narrows and limits theoretical education for students who come from the pluralistic traditions and regional languages of Indian society. Seen from this perspective, the barriers to social theory are multi-layered, linguistic, cultural, and most deeply caste based. To break these barriers, it is necessary to use regional languages in the teaching of theory, center Indian social experience, and include the voices of marginalized communities autonomously in theoretical discourse (Omvedt, 2004).

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is useful in understanding the stratification that occurs in terms of access to theoretical knowledge in higher education. Students from privileged backgrounds, whose parents are professionals or intellectuals, often have a natural advantage in engaging with theory. Exposure to academic discourse from an early age is more likely to familiarize them with the language and concepts of theory. In contrast, students from marginalized communities may lack these advantages. For a student who has studied mainly simple, mother-tongue textbooks in his or her early education, encountering in-depth theoretical study can be overwhelming. For marginalized communities, academic theory is not just a challenge but an exclusionary mechanism because the tools needed to engage with it, advanced language skills, access to resources, and cultural familiarity are often out of their reach. The lack of local language translations further exacerbates this gap, reinforcing hierarchies in academia. Academic institutions also help maintain these inequalities because they are staffed with people who have already gained proficiency in the same language and do not want their skills to be appropriated by other groups that have remained outside these institutions. There is a clear bias towards certain forms of expression and knowledge, which privileges students who can quickly grasp and reproduce theoretical concepts. The elitism of theoretical knowledge is not just linguistic but also political. As theories developed in Western contexts are uncritically applied to Indian or other non-Western settings, there is often a failure to understand differences in historical, cultural, and social contexts. This imposition of Eurocentric theories on non-Western realities reflects a broader Orientalist trend in academia, where knowledge from the global North is privileged over indigenous or locally developed forms of knowledge. Theorizing becomes an exercise in maintaining intellectual hierarchies, where the experiences and realities of marginalized communities are either ignored or forced into inappropriate frameworks.

This hierarchical nature of theory is also manifest in the division between abstract "grand theory" and empirical research. As C. Wright Mills observed, grand theory often obscures the diversity of life experiences by imposing homogenous explanations on heterogeneous phenomena. Also, an overemphasis on empirical data can lead to what Mills calls "abstract empiricism," where data is disconnected from meaningful analysis. The task of sociologists, therefore, is to strike a balance between these extremes, developing middle-range theories that are grounded and provide conceptual insight.

Intellectual arrogance, often manifested through complex prose and impenetrable jargon, alienates students and stifles intellectual engagement. This problem can be addressed by reimagining theory not as an abstract exercise of intellectual elitism but as a tool for understanding everyday life. The alienation that many students feel towards theory underscores the need for such a change, which can be defined as decolonizing social theory. This decolonization means not only incorporating non-Western perspectives but also making theory accessible to people from all socio-economic backgrounds. As sociologists such as Erving Goffman have shown, theory is embedded in the everyday lives of individuals, making it an essential part of lived reality.

To overcome "theory-phobia," educators and scholars must redefine theoretical education as an interactive and inclusive process. This includes recognizing the cultural and linguistic barriers that prevent students from engaging with theory and adopting teaching methods that demystify abstract concepts. By transforming theory into a more accessible and relatable storytelling experience, educators can break down the hierarchies that currently characterize academia, enabling more inclusive and critical engagement with theoretical knowledge. Social theory, when disconnected from reality becomes inaccessible and elitist, further reinforcing educational inequalities.

The Empirical Lens: From Data to Discourse

The debate concerning the legitimacy of empirical knowledge in sociological theory, especially in the Indian context, has been decisively shaped by scholars like Gopal Guru, Sundar Sarukkai, and Raghuram Raju. Gopal Guru critiques the hegemonic division within Indian social sciences between the privileged "theoretical Brahmins" and the marginalized "empirical Shudras," which reflects a caste-based epistemic hierarchy that sidelines the intellectual contributions of marginalized communities. Guru argues for democratizing social sciences by legitimizing empirical knowledge as authentic intellectual engagement rather than relegating it to mere experience or data without theoretical value. This binary, Guru claims, hinders the inclusive theorization necessary to accurately reflect social realities and struggles of oppressed groups (Guru, 2002; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012).

In their work, *The Cracked Mirror* (2012), Sundar Sarukkai, collaborating with Gopal Guru, elaborates on how empirical knowledge entwines with language, thought, and political consciousness. They frame empirical knowledge not as antithetical to theory but as a philosophical category that should interact with abstract social science discourse. This collaborative effort emphasizes the moral

imperative to dismantle epistemic hierarchies that delegitimize context-dependent knowledge forms emerging from marginalized lived experiences. To add to this debate, Raghuram Raju introduces the concept of the “Located Universal.” He posits that for a sociological theory to be authentic and legitimate; its universality must be rooted in specific socio-cultural contexts. This counters the idea that only abstract, decontextualized theories meet scientific rigor, arguing instead that a universal theoretical principle gains legitimacy precisely because it emerges from a particular situated context.

This debate confronts classical objections that empirical knowledge’s subjectivity and contextuality undermine sociology’s aim for generalizable, scientific knowledge. Instead, these scholars insist on expanding the epistemological boundaries to include locally grounded, experiential knowledge as both valid and necessary for a sociology that addresses India’s complex caste and socio-cultural realities. Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai challenge the exclusion of empirical knowledge from legitimate theoretical discourse as a form of epistemic injustice rooted in social, cultural, and caste hierarchies. They advocate for an egalitarian sociology that recognizes the intellectuality of experiential knowledge. This is further complemented by Raghuram Raju’s concept of the “Located Universal,” which rethinks universality as inherently contextual.

While agreeing with Gopal Guru’s emphasis on experience, Sundar Sarukkai critically invokes Jurgen Habermas’s Enlightenment rationalism to add a layer of caution. He argues that making experience the sole foundation of knowledge risks subordinating logic to emotion, potentially weakening academic rigor and the universality of social theory. Sarukkai references Habermas’s position that rational deliberation, distinct from emotional reaction is essential for constructing any valid social-theoretical framework. According to this view, conflating experience with theory risks losing the necessary methodological distance that preserves a theory’s logical coherence and generalizability.

However, this Habermasian critique does not fully accommodate the epistemic and existential realities of marginalized communities like Dalits, which Gopal Guru foregrounds. Guru contends that pure abstract logic divorced from the emotional and historical consciousness intrinsic to oppressed groups is insufficient for truly understanding social realities. He treats experience not as a mere subjective anecdote but as a legitimate philosophical category that must be integrated with reflection and theory. For Guru, Dalit discourse uniquely includes both the empirical facts of oppression and the internalized pain and cultural memory associated with that oppression, which are critical for theorizing their social condition. Separating logic from emotion, as Habermas’s framework would insist, risks rendering Dalit lived realities merely objects of external analysis rather than authentic sources of knowledge and agency. Thus, Guru challenges the limitations of Habermasian rationalism by emphasizing the necessity of a social theory that equally honors experiential consciousness and logical rigor, where emotional-historical insight is not sidelined but seen as constitutive of intellectual inquiry into deprived communities. The dialectic of logic and emotion in social theory, especially regarding Dalit and OBCs experiences, reflects a deeper epistemological tension about whose knowledge is considered valid and how universal social knowledge can be genuinely inclusive.

This nuanced debate between Sarukkai and Guru is well documented in *The Cracked Mirror* (2012), where Sarukkai acknowledges the centrality of theory’s distance from experience but also grapples with ethical demands to engage with lived experience in theorizing. Guru, on the other hand, insists that theory must grow out of experience and that reflection, not mere reaction is necessary to maintain theory’s critical capacity. This conceptual tension highlights the broader challenge of integrating marginalized experiential knowledge with dominant academic paradigms grounded in Enlightenment rationalism. Sarukkai’s Habermasian critique underscores the value of logical deliberation in social theory but may inadequately address the political and ontological significance of marginalized group’s emotional and experiential consciousness that Guru elevates as a source of philosophical and theoretical legitimacy.

Jurgen Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality is a direct product of its specific historical-cultural context: post-World War II Germany and the political horrors of Nazism. His framework prioritizes rational deliberation and mutual understanding in language-based interaction, with the goal of establishing intersubjective consensus through reasoned argumentation. Habermas emphasizes that rational communication involves participants holding each other accountable for truthfulness, normative rightness, and sincerity in their validity claims, all justified through public reasoning rather than emotion or purely subjective experience (Habermas, 1984/1987).

Gopal Guru foregrounds the indispensability of experience and emotion in generating social knowledge, especially from historically marginalized and oppressed groups such as Dalits. Guru critiques purely formal rationalism for ignoring how experiential consciousness, embodied pain, and cultural memory are essential epistemological sources for understanding social realities shaped by exclusion and domination. He argues that isolating logic from emotion risks reducing lived social oppression to mere objects of detached analysis rather than authentic sites of knowledge and agency (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012). Thus, Guru’s position insists on expanding epistemology to integrate emotional-historical consciousness as a legitimate philosophical category, especially significant in the Indian sociological context.

A core counterpoint is that Habermas's theories, which Sarukkai invokes to critique Guru were themselves born out of a very different historical experience and cultural setting. Barwa (2025) Habermas's model presumes a communicative ideal that emerged from a relatively stabilized democratic European context, whereas Indian experiences of caste oppression and marginalization articulate forms of knowledge inseparable from emotion and collective memory. Therefore, the debate between Sarukkai (drawing on Habermas) and Guru challenges us to reconsider whether logic alone suffices in social theory building or if experience and emotion must also be epistemologically foundational, particularly in pluralistic societies like India with deep histories of social exclusion. This discussion is highly relevant for Indian sociology, demanding more inclusive epistemic frameworks that recognize the validity of marginalized experiential knowledge alongside formal rational deliberation.

From local to glocal lens

A central aim of the colonial structure of social studies has been to provide the ruled societies with an interpretation of their history that automatically makes them see themselves as underdeveloped, backward, and incapable. Through this process, a form of knowledge was created that only legitimized the interests of the ruling class and permanently suppressed the self-possibility of the ruled communities (Chatterjee, 2004; Chibber, 2013). Such social studies not only controlled the interpretation of social structures but also dominated the cognitive framework of the colonial society (Chatterjee, 2004). This trend has not completely ended even in the post-colonial era. Even today, in most universities, especially in academic institutions of the Global South, the same theoretical frameworks are taught that have originated from European contexts and have been promoted as universal. Interpretations of local experiences within these frameworks are either absent, or they are reduced to mere "data" used to test Western theories, rather than as a source of new knowledge-making (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012; Chibber, 2013). Against this colonial and intellectual domination, several contemporary sociologists notably Gopal Guru, Partha Chatterjee, Vivek Chibber, and Raghurama Raju, emphasize the need to build new theoretical frameworks based on local experiences, languages, ethnic formations, and cultural memories (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012; Chatterjee, 2004; Chibber, 2013; Raju, 2012).

The Indian freedom struggle was not only a movement for political liberation but also a profound process of intellectual and cultural renaissance. Leading thinkers of this era, including Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Dr. Ambedkar, and Ram Manohar Lohia conceptualized Swaraj (self-rule) as encompassing the decolonization of knowledge, language, tradition, and social understanding. They understood that colonial knowledge structures defined Indian society through a Western lens, often diminishing indigenous traditions and philosophies (Chatterjee, 2004; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012).

In response, an alternative social vision emerged during the freedom struggle, seeking to interpret Indian society based on its own linguistic, cultural, and philosophical grounds rather than through imposed Western frameworks. This movement was embodied in the broader Indian Renaissance a period marked by the revival and reassertion of indigenous intellectual traditions, arts, and hereditary knowledge systems. Leaders and thinkers of this period strove to revitalise classical Indian learning, promote regional languages, and integrate spiritual, ethical, and social reforms rooted in Indian philosophical traditions.

Central to this renaissance was the re-centering of Indian philosophy, education, village systems, labor, self-reliance, and justice as critical elements of national identity and social progress. Figures like Gandhi advocated for "*Nai Talim*" (basic education) and village self-sufficiency, while Tagore emphasized the creative synthesis of tradition and modernity in his educational experiments at Santiniketan. Dr. Ambedkar and Lohia, meanwhile, grounded their social justice projects in the re-examination of caste and social relations through the lens of Indian philosophical traditions.

Ultimately, this intellectual and cultural awakening not only informed the character of the independence movement but also laid the foundation for a pluralistic, self-confident, and distinctly Indian approach to modern social development rejecting mere imitation of the West and instead blending indigenous traditions with selected elements of global thought as an assertion of true Swaraj (Chatterjee, 2004; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012).

Although this intellectual restructuring was important during the freedom struggle, this alternative knowledge tradition was not given a formal place in Indian universities after independence. Instead, the existing frameworks of colonial social studies such as European sociological theory, Greek philosophy, and Western political thought became the foundation of university education, resulting in curricula where Indian thinkers and traditions are often marginalized or treated as secondary. For example, the study of political science in most institutions typically begins with Plato, Aristotle, Locke, and Rousseau, while Indian political thought such as that of Kautilya, Buddha, Kabir, Tukaram, or Ambedkar is largely neglected or only briefly included (Batra, 2020). Philosophy, sociology, and other humanities disciplines continue to be taught in forms disconnected from Indian linguistic and intellectual traditions, with Indian philosophy often confined to cultural studies rather than treated as a theoretical or discursive framework (Batra, 2020).

In recent years, many sociologists have critically examined the continued dominance of Western frameworks in Indian social studies. Political scientist Manoranjan Mohanty notably questions whether, after decades of independence, Indian social sciences have truly

transformed the colonial discourse imposed upon them. He emphasizes the necessity to scrutinize the prevailing discourse in post-colonial society to assess if meaningful change has occurred or if colonial intellectual structures continue to marginalize indigenous knowledge traditions. Mohanty highlights that this intellectual colonization is not confined to India alone but is a widespread phenomenon across formerly colonized regions of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, where local histories and cultures have been systematically undermined by Western epistemic dominance (Mohanty, 2021).

Nigerian scholar Achille Mbembe and Kenyan thinker Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have emphasized that colonialism extended beyond the extraction of resources to deeply infiltrate knowledge systems, shaping methods and epistemologies through what Ngũgĩ terms the 'colonisation of the mind' (Ngũgĩ, 1981). This mental domination manifested in cultural and intellectual control, marginalizing indigenous languages, traditions, and ways of knowing, and imposing Western epistemic frameworks as universal standards. Post-colonial states, including India, inherited these colonial curricula and academic structures that perpetuated colonial modes of discourse, limiting the possibility of alternative, locally grounded knowledge production (Mbembe, 2017; Ngũgĩ, 1981). Manoranjan Mohanty advocates for transforming this inherited discourse to construct social science theories rooted in the lived experiences and specific socio-cultural realities of Indian society. He echoes broader global trends towards a 'glocal' approach that integrates global perspectives with local context-sensitive knowledge (Mohanty, 2021). Mohanty further critiques the limits of Marxist discourse in India, highlighting its inability to fully engage with complex social features such as caste, religion, and language, which are crucial to understanding Indian society (Mohanty, 2021).

A similar critical opposition emerges in the discourse on subaltern and alternative frameworks. Subaltern studies initially sought to center the experiences, life processes, and systemic exploitation of grassroots populations. However, despite its intent to foreground marginalized voices, the intellectual foundations of subaltern studies largely derive from Western theoretical traditions particularly the Gramscian framework, Western Marxism, and postmodernist influences (Guha, 1997; Chakrabarty, 2000). In parallel, alternative discourse critiques Western modernity, scientism, and rationalist approaches by advocating for a return to an 'authentic' social structure rooted in Indian tradition, spirituality, and cultural values. While this critique opposes colonial and Brahminical domination, it simultaneously grapples with concerns around the potential rise of cultural fundamentalism, which may threaten pluralism, secularism, and democratic ideals (Mohanty, 2021).

Mohanty (2021) contends that India still requires the development of an alternative social studies paradigm one that resists both Brahmanical hegemony and capitalist-colonial legacies. Such a sociology would be non-Brahmanical, community-focused, and grounded in local knowledge, lived experience, and struggles, thereby enabling meaningful theorization rooted in indigenous contexts and emancipatory goals.

This proposal is neither a complete rejection of Western social studies nor a mere reiteration of Indian tradition, but rather a pursuit of an emancipatory discursive framework that fosters a pluralistic, indigenous, and historically contextualized sociological perspective. Comparable intellectual movements include African decolonial theory, Latin American 'epistemologies of the South' as articulated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and indigenous knowledge movements in countries like the Philippines all of which have challenged Western epistemic dominance and created alternative local theoretical frameworks (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Santos, 2014). Mohanty's argument underscores that Indian social studies must both engage with its specific socio-cultural particularities and develop a discourse free from colonial mindsets, capable of genuinely addressing democratic, pluralistic, and historically situated realities (Mohanty, 2021).

Conclusion

The paper concludes by establishing the urgent need to transform Indian academia into a more inclusive, pluralistic, and democratic arena, one that values local languages, indigenous knowledge, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities as foundational sources for theory and social analysis. The dominance of Western theories, English language instruction, and caste-based epistemic hierarchies continues to exclude the voices and knowledge traditions rooted in India's diversity. This exclusion is not simply a barrier of access but represents deep historical and structural injustices embedded in the very process of knowledge production.

Legitimize empirical and experiential wisdom and develop frameworks that are contextually anchored in Indian realities. Such a transformation does not mean rejecting all global or Western insights; rather, it requires a dialogic reimagining of theory where universality is grounded in specific socio-cultural experiences, as articulated by Indian scholars like Gopal Guru, Sundar Sarukkai, and Raghuram Raju. Only by dismantling linguistic, caste, and epistemic hierarchies can academic discourse become relevant and just for all Indians.

By advocating for intellectual democratization and asserting the philosophical value of lived experience, the paper positions Indian academia at a crossroads: either persist in reproducing colonial paradigms and exclusions or embrace a transformative project that recognizes the rich multiplicity of India's social and intellectual landscape as the very basis for genuine theoretical innovation and

social justice.

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