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Postcolonial Epistemologies and Epistemic Justice in the Humanities; A South Asian Perspective on Critical Enquiry, Pedagogical Decolonization, and Algorithmic Futures

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Abstract

This paper investigates the transformative trajectories of humanistic inquiry through the lens of South Asian epistemologies, postcolonial theory, and the expanding horizons of the digital humanities in the Global South. Focusing on the historical dominance of Eurocentric interpretive paradigms in higher education, this study demonstrates how integrating non-Western traditions of critical debate—such as Indian Mimamsa hermeneutics, Buddhist Nagarjuna dialectics, and Rabindranath Tagore's holistic education framework—provides essential tools for addressing twenty-first-century societal crises. The article further evaluates the challenges of algorithmic bias, digital archival sovereignty, and systemic educational inequality, arguing that a truly universal humanistic discourse must embrace epistemic pluralism and decolonized pedagogical models.

Keywords: South Asian Epistemologies; Digital Humanities; Epistemic Pluralism; Decolonized Pedagogy.

1. Introduction: De-centering the Humanist Canon

The discipline of the humanities has historically served as the primary arena for interrogating human culture, selfhood, ethical duty, and historical memory. However, for centuries, the global conceptualization of humanistic inquiry has been heavily dominated by Western European paradigms established during the Enlightenment and the industrial modern era. While classical Western humanism contributed fundamental concepts regarding individual liberty, rational critique, and institutional democracy, its universalizing claims frequently obscured non-Western systems of thought, delegitimizing alternative modes of knowing as pre-modern or informal.

In the contemporary globalized world, characterized by ecological crisis, digital fragmentation, and severe socio-economic disparities, the traditional Western humanist canon is no longer sufficient on its own. Re-evaluating the humanities from a South Asian perspective requires a fundamental de-centering of Eurocentric assumptions. It necessitates engaging with traditions of intellectual inquiry that have continuously operated across South Asia for millennia, blending rigorous textual criticism, moral philosophy, aesthetic theory, and social critique.

This article argues that epistemic justice—the fair and equal recognition of diverse knowledge systems—is crucial for the renewal of the humanities in global higher education. By examining how Indian philosophical frameworks intersect with postcolonial critiques and digital transformations, this paper outlines a path toward a truly pluralistic, socially responsive, and critical humanistic discipline.

2. Epistemic Pluralism and Ancient Indian Traditions of Inquiry

Long before the formal institutionalization of modern humanities faculties, South Asia possessed sophisticated traditions of critical analysis, linguistic philosophy, and philosophical debate. Contrary to early colonial mischaracterizations that framed Indian thought as purely mystical or uncritical, classical Indian intellectual traditions developed highly systematic and rigorous analytic methods.

A prime example is the Mimamsa school of hermeneutics, which formulated complex principles for textual interpretation, semantic analysis, and contextual exegesis. Mimamsa scholars analyzed how sentence structure, context, intent, and structural coherence govern meaning, creating a methodology directly comparable to modern Western linguistic hermeneutics.

Similarly, the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna established the Madhyamaka dialectic, a radical system of critical skepticism designed to deconstruct fixed concepts, dogmatic essences, and rigid ontological categories. This dialectical tradition anticipates key insights of modern Western post-structuralism and deconstruction by showing how conceptual frameworks are relational and interdependent.

Furthermore, the Jain philosophy of Syadvada (the doctrine of conditioned predication) and Anekantavada (the theory of non-absolutism) established that reality is multifaceted and complex, requiring multiple perspectives to be fully understood. In an era marked by intense ideological polarization, these ancient South Asian epistemologies provide invaluable intellectual tools for fostering intellectual humility, nuanced debate, and multidimensional critique.

3. Colonial Historiography and Postcolonial Critique

The historical trajectory of the humanities in modern India cannot be understood apart from the legacy of British colonial rule. During the nineteenth century, colonial administrators established educational systems designed to produce an administrative class steeped in Western literature, history, and legal philosophy. This process intentionally marginalized indigenous languages, intellectual lineages, and oral histories, creating a systemic epistemic hierarchy.

In response to this institutional displacement, twentieth-century South Asian intellectuals launched powerful counter-traditions of postcolonial critique. The Subaltern Studies collective, led by scholars such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, revolutionized historiography and literary studies globally. They demonstrated that colonial archives were intrinsically biased toward elite administrative narratives, systematically silencing the voices, agencies, and historical consciousness of subaltern groups, peasants, and marginalized communities.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal interrogation regarding whether the subaltern can speak highlighted how imperial and patriarchal structures prevent marginalized subjects from attaining true communicative agency within dominant institutional discourses. Meanwhile, Homi Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity, mimicry, and third space dismantled the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, showing how cultural identity is continuously negotiated, contested, and re-articulated. These postcolonial interventions fundamentally transformed global humanistic scholarship, demonstrating that historical analysis must critically examine power relations embedded within archival creation and literary representation.

4. Tagore's Pedagogical Vision and Aesthetic Humanism

A vital alternative to both colonial utilitarianism and narrow nationalist educational models emerged in the work of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore rejected the rigid, examination-driven model of colonial schooling, which he criticized for alienating students from their natural environment, creative intuition, and cultural heritage.

In establishing Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan in 1921, Tagore sought to realize an aesthetic and universalist humanism rooted in nature, freedom, and intercultural dialogue. Tagore believed that genuine humanistic education must integrate intellect, emotion, artistic expression, and moral responsibility. Rather than viewing education as a instrument for economic productivity, Tagore emphasized the cultivation of global empathy, creative freedom, and spiritual harmony.

Tagore's educational philosophy offers a profound critique of modern market-oriented education, which increasingly prioritizes technical specialization at the expense of creative synthesis, artistic contemplation, and ethical reflection. Re-engaging with Tagorean humanism provides a valuable blueprint for revitalizing higher education, reminding us that the primary purpose of the humanities is to nurture complete, empathetic, and culturally conscious human beings capable of building peaceful global communities.

5. Digital Humanities in the Global South: Archival Sovereignty and AI Bias

The twenty-first century has witnessed the rapid expansion of the digital humanities, a discipline that integrates computational techniques—such as text mining, digital archiving, geospatial mapping, and machine learning—with humanistic inquiry. While digital tools offer unprecedented opportunities to digitize, preserve, and analyze cultural artifacts, they also present significant structural challenges for the Global South.

A major challenge is digital archival inequality. A vast proportion of global digital infrastructure, data storage, and funding remains concentrated in wealthy Western institutions. Consequently, non-Western historical manuscripts, regional literature, and oral traditions are frequently digitized by foreign entities, leading to new forms of digital knowledge extraction and loss of local archival sovereignty. To prevent digital neo-colonialism, institutions in the Global South must build independent digital repositories, ensuring local ownership, open access, and culturally respectful preservation.

Moreover, the contemporary proliferation of artificial intelligence models raises critical concerns regarding algorithmic bias and epistemic hegemony. Large language models and predictive algorithms are overwhelmingly trained on digitized datasets originating in the Global North. As a result, these computational tools routinely reproduce Eurocentric cultural assumptions, linguistic biases, and historical omissions.

Humanities scholars in South Asia and across the Global South play a critical role in scrutinizing these technologies. By conducting algorithmic audits, evaluating training data representation, and developing localized, multi-lingual datasets, humanists ensure that technological futures do not erase linguistic diversity or perpetuate historical inequities. The humanities provide the essential ethical frameworks required to govern artificial intelligence responsibly.

6. Conclusion: Reimagining the Humanities for Epistemic Justice

The humanities stand at a crucial historical juncture. The traditional arguments for their value—grounded purely in Western canonical preservation or passive appreciation of culture—are insufficient to address contemporary global complexities. To

remain vital and transformative, the humanities must embrace epistemic justice, dismantling institutional hierarchies and integrating marginalized intellectual traditions into the core of global scholarship.

As demonstrated through the South Asian experience, rich traditions of linguistic hermeneutics, dialectical skepticism, postcolonial historiography, and aesthetic education offer indispensable insights for contemporary global challenges. These traditions provide powerful remedies against the narrowing effects of economic utilitarianism, environmental degradation, and technological polarization.

Building a sustainable future requires higher education systems that resist treating students merely as economic units. By fostering critical thinking, historical literacy, ethical reflection, and intercultural empathy, the humanities equip individuals to navigate an increasingly complex world. Restoring the humanities to the center of global intellectual life is not an academic luxury; it is an urgent requirement for nurturing a just, pluralistic, and humane society.

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