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Classical Hermeneutics, Subaltern Historiography, and Epistemic Pluralism

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Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive re-examination of the humanities through the rich epistemic landscape of South Asian intellectual traditions. By contrasting Eurocentric interpretive frameworks with classical Indian philosophy—specifically Nyaya logic, Mimamsa textual exegesis, and Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka skepticism—this article articulates a modern paradigm for epistemic justice in higher education. Furthermore, it evaluates the contributions of South Asian Subaltern Studies, Rabindranath Tagore's aesthetic universalism, and the pressing challenges of digital archival sovereignty and algorithmic hegemony in the Global South. The paper concludes that a decolonized, pluralistic approach to the humanities is crucial for sustaining democratic deliberation and moral reasoning in a hyper-technological age.

Keywords: South Asian Epistemologies; Epistemic Justice; Decolonized Humanities; Subaltern Studies; Digital Archival Sovereignty.

1. Introduction:

The Need for Epistemic Justice in Global Humanities

The discipline of the humanities has long served as the intellectual foundation for understanding human culture, moral philosophy, language, and historical memory. However, the institutionalization of higher education across the modern world remains heavily shaped by Eurocentric paradigms established during the Enlightenment and the period of European colonial expansion. While European humanism generated crucial tools for rational inquiry and political theory, its claim to universal applicability frequently marginalized non-Western epistemologies, categorizing indigenous, Asian, and African intellectual systems as localized, mythic, or pre-rational.

In the contemporary era—marked by severe socio-economic inequities, ecological degradation, cultural polarization, and rapid digital transformation—re-evaluating the humanities from a South Asian perspective is both timely and essential. South Asia possesses one of the world's oldest continuous traditions of rigorous philosophical debate, literary criticism, and historical reflection. Unpacking these traditions allows scholars to challenge monolithic definitions of knowledge and build a genuinely inclusive, globally conscious humanistic discipline.

This article contends that epistemic justice—defined as the equitable valuation and integration of diverse modes of knowing—must become the guiding principle for twenty-first-century higher education. By bringing South Asian philosophical heritage into direct conversation with postcolonial theory and digital humanities, this paper charts a path toward a decolonized and socially transformative humanistic curriculum.

2. Classical Indian Hermeneutics and Analytic Traditions

Far from being passive or uncritical, ancient Indian intellectual discourse developed exceptionally rigorous analytic methodologies across multiple domains of philosophy, linguistics, and exegesis. Long before the emergence of Western structuralism and hermeneutics, Indian scholars formulated sophisticated systems for analyzing language, meaning, and reality.

The Mimamsa school of philosophy stands out for its pioneering contributions to textual interpretation. Mimamsa scholars created a detailed methodology for resolving textual ambiguities, examining sentence structure (vakya), context

(prakarana), semantic capacity (samarthya), and authorial intent. Their systematic exegesis provided a precise foundation for interpreting complex normative texts, anticipating modern Western theories of literary hermeneutics by centuries.

Simultaneously, the Nyaya school established a comprehensive system of formal logic, epistemology, and debate (vada). Nyaya thinkers categorized valid sources of knowledge (pramana)—including perception (pratyaksha), inference (anumana), comparison (upamana), and trustworthy verbal testimony (shabda). This logical rigor enabled rigorous philosophical discourse across rival intellectual traditions throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Furthermore, the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna formulated the Madhyamaka dialectic, a radical system of critical skepticism that systematically deconstructed dogmatic claims to essential or absolute existence. Nagarjuna demonstrated that all concepts and phenomena exist relationally and interdependently (pratityasamutpada). In addition, Jain thinkers developed the concepts of Anekantavada (the doctrine of non-absolutism) and Syadvada (conditioned predication), which assert that truth is inherently multifaceted and cannot be captured by a single, exclusive viewpoint. Together, these ancient South Asian epistemologies supply profound conceptual instruments for fostering intellectual humility, critical skepticism, and multidimensional analysis in modern humanistic education.

3. Colonial Historiography and the Subaltern Counter-Narrative

The historical trajectory of modern education in South Asia was fundamentally altered by British colonial intervention. The institution of colonial school systems in the nineteenth century, epitomized by Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous 1835 Minute on Indian Education, deliberately aimed to replace traditional Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian scholarship with English literature and European science. This institutional shift created a profound cultural rift, marginalizing vernacular languages and indigenous intellectual lineages.

To counter colonial epistemic dominance, twentieth-century South Asian intellectuals pioneered powerful critiques of imperial power and archival representation. The Subaltern Studies collective—spearheaded by historians such as Ranajit Guha—transformed global historiography by demonstrating that colonial archives were structured to serve imperial governance and elite interests. As a result, the agency, resistance, and historical consciousness of subaltern groups—peasants, tribal communities, women, and laboring classes—were routinely erased or distorted.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', further exposed how colonial and patriarchal power structures systematically deny communicative agency to marginalized subjects within dominant academic discourses. Complementing this, Homi Bhabha developed concepts of cultural hybridity, mimicry, and the 'third space,' showing how colonized cultures actively negotiate, subvert, and reshape dominant imperial narratives. These postcolonial interventions dismantled the myth of neutral historical archiving, proving that humanistic scholarship must continually interrogate power dynamics embedded within historical sources.

4. Tagorean Humanism and Aesthetic Universalism

A compelling alternative to both colonial utilitarianism and narrow, exclusionary nationalism was articulated by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore offered a vision of humanistic education centered on artistic freedom, nature, spiritual harmony, and intercultural understanding.

In 1921, Tagore founded Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, West Bengal, under the motto 'Where the whole world meets in one single nest.' Tagore rejected the mechanical, examination-driven model of colonial schooling, which he argued deadened creative intuition and alienated students from their lived environment. Instead, he advocated for an integrated education where literature, music, fine arts, and philosophical reflection were placed on equal footing with natural sciences.

Tagore's aesthetic universalism provides a vital critique of contemporary educational trends that reduce higher learning to technical workforce production. His philosophy reminds us that the primary goal of the humanities is not merely economic utility, but the cultivation of moral imagination, creative expression, and global empathy. Re-engaging with Tagorean principles offers higher education institutions a restorative framework for nurturing complete, socially responsible human beings.

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

The twenty-first century has witnessed the swift integration of computational tools into humanistic research through the field of digital humanities. Techniques such as natural language processing, algorithmic text mining, and high-resolution digital archiving offer transformative possibilities for preserving and analyzing South Asia's vast cultural heritage. However, these technological advancements also introduce new structural vulnerabilities.

A critical issue facing the Global South is digital archival inequality. A significant portion of digital infrastructure, server storage, and computational funding remains concentrated in Western universities and private corporations. Consequently, rare manuscripts, historical documents, and oral histories from South Asia are frequently digitized and hosted by foreign institutions, risking a new form of digital knowledge extraction and loss of archival sovereignty. To ensure epistemic autonomy, institutions in the Global South must establish independent, open-access digital repositories governed by local communities and scholars.

Furthermore, the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence and large language models poses serious challenges regarding algorithmic hegemony and linguistic bias. Most commercial AI architectures are trained on massive datasets overwhelmingly sourced from English-language internet content originating in the Global North. As a result, these automated

tools routinely perpetuate Eurocentric cultural biases, fail to process complex non-Western languages accurately, and erase regional historical perspectives.

Humanities scholars in South Asia play an indispensable role in scrutinizing these digital technologies. By conducting algorithmic audits, developing multi-lingual corpora, and formulating ethical frameworks rooted in local traditions, humanists ensure that technological futures do not erase cultural diversity or reinforce historic inequities.

6. Conclusion: Reimagining the Humanities for a Pluralistic Future

The global crisis confronting the humanities cannot be resolved by merely defending traditional institutional structures or relying on an unexamined Western canon. To reclaim their vital role in public life, the humanities must embrace genuine epistemic pluralism, integrating diverse intellectual histories and challenging structural inequalities in knowledge production.

As demonstrated through the South Asian experience, classical traditions of linguistic analysis and dialectical skepticism, coupled with postcolonial critique and Tagorean aesthetic humanism, supply essential tools for navigating the ethical, political, and technological complexities of the modern world. These frameworks provide powerful alternatives to market-driven reductionism and technological determinism.

Higher education must reaffirm its commitment to cultivating reflective, critical, and empathetic citizens. By centering epistemic justice, decolonizing curricula, and critically governing digital technologies, the humanities can fulfill their highest calling: fostering a world grounded in mutual understanding, intellectual humility, and shared human dignity.

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