Socio-Cultural Dimensions of the Twentieth-Century Indian Criticism/Theory

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ABSTRACT

During the late 1990s, there was a sense of exhaustion with theories, as indicated by phrases like "death of theory," "post-theory," and "after-theory." This was reflected in the works of Thomas Docherty, Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, and Valentine Cunningham. However, in the early 2000s, Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the "death of postmodernism" and similar ideas created new opportunities for theoretical exploration, albeit with diminished influence, in Western societies. Subsequently, after publishing his book *After Theory* in 2003, Eagleton released *How to Read a Poem* in 2006. Other critics also produced comparable works, such as *Reading after Theory* in 2002 and *Life after Theory* in 2003. These works emphasised the importance of the text in educational settings.

It is evident that English academia, particularly in the Western countries, appears to have exhausted its interest in Theory. On the other hand, Indian academia seems to be entangled in its own state of confusion, with an increasing number of dissertations being written each year that apply various theories to texts without any significant connection. Zena Hitz's proposition to rejuvenate Indian universities by reverting to classical origins is opportune in this context. If the solutions to humanity's future inquiries have been concealed within its history, why not also with the field of humanities?

Introduction

Each generation believes its time to be superior to the preceding one. However, the current era is undeniably fascinating, as it has experienced rapid advancements and unparalleled progress in human growth, primarily driven by technology breakthroughs. In his article titled "Knowledge, Globalization and the Third World", Singh categorises the stages of Indian individual and society evolution into 6 distinct stages. The first stage, known as primitive society, spans roughly from the beginning to the fifth century CE. The second stage, referred to as agrarian society, covers the period from the 4th century CE to the 18th century CE. The third stage, called the Industrial society, encompasses the period from the early 19th century to the mid-20th century. The fourth stage, known as post-Industrial society, extends from the mid-20th century to the end of the 20th century and the millennium. The final stage, predominantly occurring in the 21st century, can also be observed in the last ten years of the 20th century, during which there was a notable transition in terms of the sourcing of food resources and agricultural goods as well as knowledge. Industrial and post-industrial products, particularly information and knowledge products, are advancing rapidly in this age.

Similarly, knowledge, the techniques of gaining and retaining knowledge, and the functions and purposes of knowledge vary from one culture and civilization to another. There is a significant contrast between the western world and India here. The majority of knowledge in the Western world is grounded in intellect, logic, and rationality, but Indian knowledge places a higher emphasis on intuition over intellect. Due to the western dominance in globalisation, there has been a steady emergence of a scientific mindset that promotes rational thinking, leading to enlightenment, and ultimately resulting in the industrial revolution, which coincides with territorial expansion.

Globalization and Knowledge-Building in the Twentieth Century: Indian and Western Approaches

The Western approach to knowledge always involved modernising the resources of the Earth and bringing enlightenment to the less developed regions of the non-Western globe, especially the twentieth century. The additional concern at hand pertains to the technique employed by the Western knowledge system that relies on difference as the modality of knowing. The philosophical inclination relies on discerning differences in order to comprehend a reality by observing it in contrast to other occurrences that may be similar or dissimilar to it. This theory of difference relies on binary oppositions, which in turn give rise to the concept of otherness. It perceives the world in terms of a "us versus them" mentality. It centres on the examination and elucidation of differences in order to separate and take advantage of them. Here, the distinction is frequently not only acknowledged, recognised, and acknowledged, but also excessively valued to an extreme degree. Furthermore, the act of marginalising certain groups is fetishized and transformed into a profitable form of communication.

The issue arises when literature deviates from its intended purpose of addressing literary principles and fostering societal cohesion, since the excessive emphasis on differences undermines the promotion of essential life values.

The mindset in Indian tradition is substantially divergent. The socio-cultural ethos of Indian culture and Indian society rely on two types of intellect: nanatva-buddhi, which is the intellect that differentiates, and ananatva-buddhi, which is the intellect that unifies. The latter acknowledges the presence of various forms while also perceiving the common element shared by all of them. In Vakyapadiya (1.9), Bhartrhari refers to it as "Sarvavadavirodhini".

An essential attribute of globalisation in India, especially in the twentieth century, is its association with

Westernisation, primarily due to its widespread influence in economic activities, technological advancements, communication, and warfare. Globalisation is perceived as a means of modernization. The process of Globalization is important to an average Indian but should be considered in a discerned manner. Furthermore, as a participant in the process, one should assertively reject the influence of Western culture while embracing the concept of modernization.

In the Indian context, Singh refers to the phenomenon of globalisation occurring in five distinct waves. The initial wave commenced with the migration of tribes from the northern and western regions, and the Indian reaction to this rudimentary form of globalisation was characterised by political opposition. The second wave of globalisation occurred when India came into contact with the Greeks from the western region, particularly Alexander the Great. King Porus was the response to it. The third phase of globalisation manifested with the advent of Islamic rulers. Bhakti poetry holds unparalleled literary and mystical value in the globe and was a response to it. The last phase, known as colonial encounter, was the pinnacle of sophistication and consolidation in the process of globalisation. The response to this came in the form of Swami Vivekananda's spiritual teachings, Sri Aurobindo's blend of political and spiritual awareness, and Mahatma Gandhi's tactic of nonviolent resistance. It led India towards achieving its independence. The fifth phase of globalisation, started in the twentieth century, which is currently ongoing, is distinct from its previous stages due to the convergence of invisible foreign and domestic institutions, resulting in the mutual use of globalization's advantages. This is manifest in the way 'Theory' is being done in the departments of English worldwide.

Fate of 'Theory' in the Twentieth Century West and India

Structuralism, which marked the inception of "Theory" itself, focused primarily on language and a linguistic revolution led by Saussure. In the latter part of the twentieth century, there was a significant increase in the popularity of literary theory, starting with Rene Wellek's *Theory of Literature* in 1942. As the decades progressed, authors were increasingly influenced by uncontrollable, unconscious urges and other ideological and societal factors. Poststructuralist plurality challenged the notion that the text holds a central and quasi-scientific authority, by questioning the stability of language and the process of creating meaning. Upon reaching this point, it becomes evident that language is the essential element of a text, and the process of creating meaning persists. However, the methods of expressing reality through language have undergone such drastic changes that even an ordinary reader has started to question the credibility, authorization, and

entities responsible for establishing meaning. The primary determinant of this phenomenon appears to be the centrifugal force presented by Theory, which questions the essential importance of text.

It is obvious that Western academia experienced a noticeable decline in interest in theories throughout the final decade of the twentieth century. During the latter part of the 20th century, excessive preoccupation with Theory among its adherents and its excessive self-awareness resulted in a weakening of its connection to literature. "It is undeniable that critical theories have been pushed to the extent where they are used as tools to undermine texts or are themselves undermined in the process." The text "Singh 4" remains unchanged.

As a result, disappointing notes on its barrenness started being heard in works like Thomas Docherty's *After Theory* (1997), Martin Mcquillan's *Post-theory: New Directions in Criticism* (1999), and *What is Left of Theory?* (2000) by Judith Butler, *Reading After Theory* (2002) by Valentine Cunningham, Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003), etc. The end of the death of theory did not mean death but was used as a trope for the disorientation towards theory.

Now, in the Indian context, the Upanishadic expression "Ekoham Bahusyami" expresses the idea that although I am one, I appear in various forms. This statement highlights the philosophical unity of many areas of knowledge and their interdependence, while also acknowledging their epistemological diversity. In the field of literature, Professor Radhvallabh Tripathi notes that the progression of theoretical growth in India can be categorised into four distinct stages: (1) The initial phase, spanning from 3000 BC to 1000 BC, involved the practice of theatre according to the aesthetic guidelines set forth in the Vedic corpus. (2) The second phase, which occurred from around 1000 BC to the beginning of the Common Era, involved the creation of theoretical works such as Bharata's renowned Natyashastra and a lesser-known Nat-sutra by Shilalin. (3) The third phase, which took place during the first millennium of the Common Era, featured theorists such as Lollata, Sankuka, Matrugupta, Udbhata, Bhattnayaka, Abhinavgupta, Rajshekhara, Anandvardhana, who focused on the creation of meaning and linguistic defamiliarization. (4) In the present era, we are in the fourth stage when a small number of Sanskrit theorists, such as Rewaprasad Dwivedi, have revitalised ancient poetics.

What seems to have been neglected in this particular observation by Prof. Tripathi is the linguistic dominance of Sanskrit that makes these theories confined and monopolized largely to Sanskrit, Oriental

studies and Indic Studies departments under the tight disciplinary compartmentalization. Nevertheless, a small number of English departments are actively opposing and moving in the opposite direction of such categorization. The cultural heritage holds great importance, however, the absence of vernacular translations or the widespread occurrence of mistranslations, renders the non-Sanskrit knowledge inaccessible or ignorant regarding our inheritance. As a result, it is often assumed that there was a lack of Indian critical activity after Jagannātha, the renowned 17th-century literary theorist known for his theory of poetic delight, which is where most history books on Indian literary theory conclude. In the appendix of his book 'Revisiting Literature, Aesthetics and Criticism', Dr. A K Singh provides a list of over 50 Sanskrit works on 'Kavyamimamsa' from the 18th to 20th century that are not widely known.

In the departments considered to be elite, where the most recent developments in Western critical thinking are frequently echoed, the critical sphere is primarily occupied by individuals who possess a fervent desire to dismantle any structure of a narrative or discourse with an attitude of nihilistic disrespect. These individuals exhibit a form of intellectual fearfulness that causes them to perceive conspiracies in every aspect, as well as a type of knowledge-based aggression that aims to establish a hermeneutics of doubt. This is all expressed through a language of crisis, where the prevalent buzzwords are difference, disruption, displacement, rupture, and so on. Overall, this critical endeavour involves the initial process of acquiring and integrating new theories from the western world, modifying one's vocabulary and adopting a new set of terms, and subsequently applying these theoretical frameworks to Indian English or Vernacular texts. However, there is minimal regard for the suitability of this standardised approach.

This creates a perception that the state of theory in India is unoriginal and dependent, where students and scholars in Indian academia consider their greatest accomplishment to be interpreting a text as postmodern, postcolonial, or poststructural, without considering its relevance, philosophical implications, or the circumstances that gave rise to these post-structuralist theories in the Western world. They celebrate a perpetual state of uncertainty and refuse to acknowledge any positive aspects of discourses that critique this state of uncertainty, such as the renowned essay "The Deconstructive Angel" by MH Abrams.

So, the modern Indian reader is currently faced with two streams of critical thought: the Western perspective and their own indigenous perspective. The Western tradition has equipped him with the skills to analyse and interpret literature using advanced techniques. In addition, the Indian heritage has given him valuable notions and a profound appreciation for beauty. Wisdom does not lie in forsaking either the "alacrity of the

West" or the "illumination of the East", but in blending both. Prior to this, scholars such as Hiriyanna, Aurobindo, and Coomaraswamy have already illustrated the existence of such a potential.

Twentieth Century Indian Criticism: A Case of Tagore, Aurobindo and Coomaraswamy

The twentieth century is a fertile ground for literary theorization in India with Ramchandra Shukla, Hazariprasad Dwivedi and Namvar Singh in Hindi, Anandshankar Dhruv, B K Thakore, R V Pathak, Umashankar Joshi, Suresh Joshi etc. in Gujarati, B S Mardhekar, R B Patnakar, Bhalchandra Nemade etc. in Marathi, M Hiriyanna, Anand Coomarswamy, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Brajendranath Seal, V K Gokak, Angaraj Choudhary, Susanne Langer, Harold Osborne etc. in English and similarly in other Indian languages that remain mostly in oblivion. It is imperative now, not just to challenge dominant disciplines or hierarchies, but to surpass language barriers and establish new connections using critical idioms. This would involve translating vernacular theorization into English to enable productive negotiations.

Tagore's aesthetics suggests that artists, often unconsciously, adhere to an inherent principle that may be dissected into three components. (i) The constituent of personality: Each artist, in their role as a creator, have an inherent vision that necessitates manifestation through any form of artistic expression. (ii) The stylistic aspect: Each artist, being a product of their era, is compelled to convey the essence of the time influenced by the distinct socio-cultural context of their specific period. (iii) The fundamental nature of art: Each artist, as a dedicated follower of art and a skilled creator of their distinct perspective, must champion the purpose of art, which has a lasting impact across history and across many cultures.

Sri Aurobindo's aesthetics is an essential component of his philosophy concerning life and awareness. Aesthetics, for him, is not solely a source of sensory pleasure, but rather it undeniably contributes to the development of man's spiritual consciousness. The human spirit rises into the cloudless sky of freedom through the use of aesthetic sensitivity and appreciation. Aurobindo's exploration of art encompasses a wide spectrum of objectives, ranging from the most basic, which is to bring harmony into existence, to the refinement of emotions, and ultimately to the most profound aim, which is to provide a gateway to spiritual experiences. Aurobindo refers to the aesthetic progress of humanity as a vital prerequisite for the ultimate spiritual ascent. Aurobindo establishes a connection between art and the essential human faculties of contemplation, invention, and imagination, which he regards as the faculties that see reality. The connection between art and spirituality can be traced back to the Indian philosophy of art and tradition, where the term

"rasa" represents the aesthetic experience of the ultimate reality, known as "Brahmanubhuti". Aurobindo's perspective is that art is an essential component of human existence, serving as a means of artistic self-expression that enhances the aesthetic development of humanity. This perspective on art carries two significant consequences: (i) The Indian perception of art transcends simply replication or duplication of nature. (ii) Furthermore, it is not excessively abstract to the point of being completely detached from our familiar world or nature. The concept of beauty is elevated by incorporating aspects from nature, which are then transformed by the imagination to create something that is faultless or perfect, while still being related to what is familiar.

Ananda Coomaraswamy categorises Indian art as mostly focused on religious themes. The essence of such art does not just involve the replication of nature or the observable world. Indian art mostly revolves around religious themes, with the explicit goal of conveying a sense of divinity. However, the concept of the infinite and unconditioned cannot be adequately conveyed using finite language, and art is incapable of depicting the unconditioned nature of divinity. Furthermore, art is unwilling to be replicated by imposing limitations. In India, art is devoted to depicting gods, who, from the perspective of finite humans, embody various aspects of an infinite entirety. In India, art is regarded as a means of perceiving life, much as religion is. Art possesses a clear purpose, role, and significance for both the artist and the viewer. The concept of 'art for art's sake' that is prevalent in the Western world is neither applicable nor acceptable in the context of Indian art. Indian masterpieces of art transcend mere mimicry of life or nature. The Indian artworks serve as a manifestation of the pursuit of truth beyond mere superficiality. The objective of Indian art is not merely to depict nature. The empirical reality is perceived as maya or illusion, where nature is considered a veil rather than a revelation in the Indian mindset. Art should transcend becoming a mere replication of this illusory world. Ananda Coomaraswamy distinguishes between ideal beauty and empirical beauty. Indian art exhibits a cohesive essence that unifies its diverse range. Philosophical thought has been applied to differentiate between rasa-experience and ordinary experience, as well as to explore the relevance of this divergence.

Conclusion

The fifth phase of globalisation, started in the twentieth century, which is currently ongoing, is distinct from its previous stages due to the convergence of invisible foreign and domestic institutions, resulting in the mutual use of globalization's advantages. This is manifest in the way 'Theory' is being done in the

departments of English worldwide.

It is high time Indian departments of English started looking at alternative indigenous critical discourses, most of which have been formulated in Sanskrit and vernacular Indian languages but deal with fundamental questions of textual interpretation and literariness. It may be interesting to see how the twentieth century, a fertile ground for Theorization in the West, gave birth to Indian teacher-critics like M. Hiriyanna, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Aurobindo, Krishna Rayan, TRS Sharma etc. who revisited the classical poetics and developed newer frameworks of interpretation on its basis, that may rejuvenate the present "void" in literary theory and criticism by making significant departures.

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