

Review of: "A Survey: Looking for the best possible way of modern engagement with Traditional Indian knowledge"

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A constructive dialog with Debajyoti Gangopadhyay's article A Survey: Looking for the best possible way of modern engagement with Traditional Indian knowledge.

As far as knowledge construction is concerned, I agree that the present historical situation can be compared to the situation that prevailed in pre-Newtonian Europe before the advent of the scientific revolution. It does not seem to me, however, that the search for “norms of departure” from pre-existing cosmological views to new ones stands as a promising way to understand how changes in cosmological views occur. It seems clear to me that (1) such norms will be assigned a posteriori to the detriment of the diversity of possible options that may be manifested in the process; and (2) the search for “norms” or “systematic methods” would bring a Eurocentric contamination in terms of understanding (the mere fact of asking a question already conditions an answer, as anthropologists say).

The search for a “best possible way of modern engagement with traditional knowledge” also seems problematic for me. “Best” where, when, for whom and for what? To lament “the absence of any systematic method of assessment of the difference in epistemic status between traditional and modern understandings” seems to me to want to understand traditional knowledges in terms of modern understanding or modern epistemology. Perhaps that is why “most of the discussions of overlap or parallel are intrinsically endangered to result in little more than mere analogy at superficial levels of the two discourses.”

It is therefore not surprising, given the strength of colonialism, that “the respondent Indian philosophy during the colonial period happened to mean something unambiguously of non-Buddhist, non-Jain origin”. This is the situation prevalent among powerful yet colonized respondents in many other parts of the planet, including my own country, Brazil.

The more pressing question - “how much of the ‘traditionally’ received knowledge can be integrated with the knowledge system of the-then ‘Western’ origin reached India by that time?” - flows directly into the issue of building a new common world, brought into play with the decline of Western colonialism.

This question is an effective entry point to a political problem or agent: the “colonially motivated understanding of [local] histories” as a kind of cultural compulsion to only accept different modes of responses to the West if they are committed to some type of integration into modern euro -American modes of existence. That is the difficult political question of the construction of new common worlds.

It is true that around the world “pedagogical policies right from their colonial beginning failed miserably to develop effective modes of modern engagements with the traditional knowledge store.” Moreover, in most parts of the planet, traditional knowledges have been marginalized, negated, and rejected by European knowledge construction processes that used this negation to define themselves as “modern”. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that “many of the resulting responses in the question of integrating the best of East and West were turned out to be the most curious instances of epistemic violence committed to different inexact norms of comparison.”

It is also true that traditional knowledge contents are assessed very differently in sharp contrast with the modes of assessment of scientific knowledge content and its growth. Can knowledges (and Realities) originating in traditional modes of existence be extended to accommodate the vast bodies of modern empirical knowledge? Stated in other words, the question of whether the traditional knowledge should be retold keeping compatibility with the modern requirement in view or they should be understood in their own terms remains largely unsettled.

And furthermore, introducing a politically relevant symmetry that opposes colonially inclined currents, the question of whether European modernity should be retold keeping compatibility with traditional knowledges or should it be understood in its own terms as happened until recently?

One cannot try approximations and integrations between cosmologies without entering the realm of relativism. Let us remember, with Bruno Latour, that the opposite of relativism is absolutism and not realism. And there seems to be no doubt that it is the West that cultivates, at least for “lay” people, a kind of absolute truth for Western Science. The search for a relativist realism is then an ally of those who seek other modes of existence in the planet, who try to escape Western modes of existence, though not necessarily reject them all. Whereas some anthropologists argue in favour of Western rational agency as a universal human capacity and claim that the beliefs and practices of people everywhere may be assessed on that basis, others come to the rescue of the strength and dignity of other cosmologies and instead suggest that notions such as rational agency are properly applicable nowhere, not even in the West. Notwithstanding, a threat of relativism to non-moderns lies in its aversion to comparisons of any kind. By insisting on the irreducibility of variations, in a twist of argument, relativism may end up by privileging Western modes of knowing and by patronizing the capacity of the cultural others to obtain and credit genuine knowledge.

The construction of quantitative tables can be very useful for certain purposes and plays a fundamental role in the success of European empiricism when it comes to the construction of “objects”. But what can quantitative tables tell us about different cosmologies or different modes of existence or different Realities? Whatever they may say will have built into their own language the curse or privilege of the application of a colonially inclined belief or trust built by the western rational agency.