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## Decolonial Thinking, Southern Theory, and the Search for Alternative Epistemologies in the Social Sciences

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## **Decolonial Thinking, Southern Theory, and the Search for Alternative Epistemologies in the Social Sciences**

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### ***Abstract***

*A new discussion among Indian scholars has begun to initiate a critical dialogue between the postcolonial and decolonial approaches to historical and social analysis with radical traditions of social and political thought in India. Akash Singh Rathore's book *Indian Political Theory: Laying the Groundwork for Swaraj* (2017) is an important intervention that raises key questions about the politics of theory, philosophy and epistemology while also suggesting that decolonial scholarship should be aware of the dangers of 'hyper nationalism.' Taking its cue from this book, this essay critically surveys the major scholarly strands that have attempted to produce 'non-Western' epistemologies and social – historical analysis and calls for an agenda that is broader than those proposed by Indian subaltern, postcolonial, and decolonial projects.*

*Keywords: Decolonial thinking, Southern theory, Subaltern approach, decolonization, western epistemology, alternative epistemologies*

### **Introduction**

Akash Singh Rathore's book, *Indian Political Theory: Laying the Groundwork for Swaraj* (2017), is a recent addition to the efforts by scholars of the global South to produce a new body of thought in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) that is self-consciously committed to producing a non-Western social science. Rathore, an American citizen with Indian family roots, is currently a visiting Professor of Philosophy at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, India. A prolific writer on themes in political philosophy, he co-edited *Hegel's India: A Reinterpretation* (2017).

Two goals are central to this new 'search' that has encouraged radical intellectual imagination: (a) constructing alternative epistemologies for SSH in order to replace epistemic universalism with a paradigm of epistemic pluralism; and, (b) building alternative theories that can respond to Eurocentric social sciences and nativist-nationalist responses alike. Both these goals call for critiquing and rejecting both Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism in philosophy and social thought. The value of Rathore's intervention largely lies in the fact that he proposes a path of inquiry that takes the project of seeking alternatives to Eurocentrism in social theory clearly away from nationalist interpretation of India's philosophical and intellectual traditions. In India, as well as in Sri Lanka, the nativist-nationalist critique of Eurocentric philosophies and social sciences has pushed the search for alternatives into a narrow framework of the West vs. the Rest of Us, leading to the emergence of racist bodies of thought seeking legitimacy in the guise of recovering the past suppressed by

colonialism and Western science. *Hindutva* ideology in India and *Jathika Chinthanaya* ideology in Sri Lanka share this perspective of appropriating indigenous cultural and intellectual traditions for exclusionist projects of nationhood. They are constructed to serve the hegemonic politics of ethnic and cultural elites in contemporary multiethnic nation states in crisis.

Resistance to the hegemony of empiricist and positivist social sciences has its origins in Europe itself. The post-positivist alternatives that developed in Europe, following the humanist traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, emerged as major dissident traditions in social sciences. The philosophical work of Hans Georg Gadamer, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau Ponty, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Paul Ricoeur, to name but a few, formed the intellectual backdrop against which philosophical impulses for counter-positivist social science paradigms in Europe and elsewhere were sustained. Thus, the philosophical crisis that the empiricist project encountered after the fall of the school of logical positivism was a major turning point that opened up new intellectual space for the resurgence of post-positivist social sciences. Later, that is during the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, post-Marxist, poststructuralist, postmodernist, and feminist alternatives to positivism and its variants had a significant impact on SSH communities throughout the world. This also marked a period of re-radicalization of the SSH agenda. Critical rejection of the philosophical legacy of the SSH produced by the European Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was the new feature of this radicalism. The philosophical thought of postmodernism provided the primary impetus for this break. Positivist social sciences do not seem to have recovered from this philosophical encounter with postmodernism.

However, a few varieties of postcolonial thought and approach have emerged in recent decades to critique radical European strands of thought and theory, such as Marxism and postmodernism, for Eurocentrism in their epistemological standpoints; all of them constitute what can be termed the ‘decolonial turn’ in the SSH.

Some decolonial thinkers believe that a new opening is now available to shift from critique to concrete programmes of epistemology and theory working out the outlines of a new SSH paradigm. They argue that the new paradigm does not need to derive its categories and meanings from Eurocentric philosophies and sciences, given the philosophical and theoretical thoughts already available in the traditions and practices of all societies. Such thought traditions, according to the decolonial perspective, have remained not only suppressed, but ignored and neglected by modern scholarly communities. Those who practise a universalising social science have done so ignoring the local epistemologies and categories of knowing and explaining the world. The decolonial turn in the social sciences proposes to SSH practitioners a new agenda to re-lay the philosophical foundations of social science inquiry and engagement. Rathore’s book emerges against this context.

This essay seeks to construct a general account of this intellectual enterprise in the hope that it will generate some interest among Sri Lanka's SSH research communities.

### **An 'Indian' Political Thought**

Let us now turn to the substantive epistemological claims that Rathore makes in his new book. Its main objective, he says, is "to initiate a project that aims to redirect the gaze of Indian political philosophy away from the West and back upon the lived experiences of Indian political life, while presenting a case for explaining why such an effort is needed (2018, para. 2). To describe the Indian context briefly, there have been a number of intellectual strands in India critiquing the dominance of Western philosophy, science, and theory. The anthology, *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem to Modernity* (1988), edited by Ashis Nandy, is one of the pathbreaking interventions made by South Asian thinkers. Political theorists in India have of late begun to critically distance themselves from the dominant tradition of Western political philosophy and theory. Partha Chatterjee's (1986 and 1995) and Sudiptha Kaviraj's (1995) work on Indian nationalism, as well as Aditya Nigam's (2000) Dalit critique of the modern Indian concept of nation, are a few examples. However, the assertion that Indian political theory should return to its classical and 20<sup>th</sup> century political thought and practices – as represented in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, as well as in Gandhism and Ambedkarism – in order to cultivate an authentic and vibrant Indian political philosophy has triggered only a few intellectual explorations. The emerging scholarly literature on 'Dalit epistemology,' that builds on the political, social, and philosophical thought of B. R. Ambedkar, has the potential to be productive and vibrant. Rathore's book is part of this still nascent conversation (for example, Ilaih, 2001; Guru, 2001 and 2002; Nigam, 2000).

Unease with the dominance of Western philosophy, science, and social theory has been a part of India's modernity from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Gandhian nationalism, Tagorean cultural cosmopolitanism, and Indian Marxism provided, in their own distinct ways, three initial responses to Western intellectual dominance. Of course, they were not integrated components of a coherent challenge to colonial intellectual dominance; for instance, Gandhi's response to colonial intellectual hegemony was a part of his political resistance to colonial rule. He constructed a creative synthesis of India's pluralist and humanist traditions of religion and philosophy with popular beliefs and practices of resistance, justice, and self-rule. Also, Gandhi presented a reformist version of Hindu social thought, breaking off from the dominant tradition of caste-based social hierarchy, oppression, and discrimination. In that sense, Gandhi was a 'people's epistemologist' whose body of social and political thought, as scholars like Thomas Pathnam (1986), Ashis Nandy (1988 and 1992), Bhikhu Parekh (1989), Anaya Vajpey (2012), and Aditya Nigam (2009) have shown from a variety of perspectives, could be a source of inspiration for those South Asian scholars who are now seriously exploring epistemologies and theories for an alternative SSH paradigm.

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Indian Marxism has spawned a decidedly creative stream of ‘socialist’ scholarship exploring India’s pre-colonial intellectual traditions with epistemological and hermeneutical, that is, interpretative, empathy. By doing so, it has also maintained both capacity and willingness for critical engagement with, and assessment of, the past (a quality lacking in nationalist or even post-colonialist critique). Marxist intellectuals (such as D. D. Kosambi (1955 and 1956), R. S. Sharma (2004 and 2009), Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (1959 and 1976), Sarvapalli Gopal (1969), and Romila Thapar (1978 and 2013) located their enterprise in the tradition of materialist epistemology, as opposed to the ‘idealist’ epistemology of both Europe and India. This is a binary classification they borrow from Marx’s philosophical thought. Nevertheless, these Marxist scholars, who worked outside the Communist Party’s ideological grip, are highly conscious of the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological grounding of their work. For instance, Chattopadhyaya was a professional philosopher whose work reinterpreting India’s classical philosophical traditions could be considered central to any innovative effort for an alternative epistemology of social sciences in contemporary South Asia (Chattopadhyaya 1959 and 1976).

Among Indian philosophers outside the Marxist frame who provide a South Asian response to modern Western philosophy is J. N. Mohanty. Mohanty’s (1954, 2000, and 2008) work on Husserl’s phenomenology and Indian idealism is of seminal importance.

Rathore’s book critically engages with the contemporary dominant tradition of political philosophy inspired by John Rawl’s liberalism. Rawl’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971) laid the foundation for a new wave of liberal political philosophy, with any new discussion on justice and rights having to settle accounts with Rawl’s rearticulation of liberal justice. This has been the case in India too, where political theory and philosophy is taken as a serious intellectual vocation, something we may not notice in the intellectual cultures of other South Asian countries. Rathore’s complaint is that political philosophers all across postcolonial nations and the global South continue to work with categories and concepts alien to ordinary people’s lived social and political experiences. That, according to Rathore (2018), makes it urgently necessary to “decolonise Indian social and political philosophy, and rescue them from the grip of Western theories and fascination with experience-distant Western modes of analysis” (para. 3).

Thus, the fundamental epistemological and methodological concern guiding Rathore’s effort is one shared by a number of contemporary Indian scholars. As Rathore notes, much of the creative effort in current Indian social and political philosophy is oriented toward what he calls “a programme of [just such a] deconceptualisation” (2018, para. 4). It entails “not [of] modifying but instead [of] abandoning the dominant political-theoretical vocabulary incessantly emanating from the transatlantic (or Western) world. Its overriding concern is that of Svaraj (an indigenous social and political concept, which can be variously translated as “self-rule,” or more robustly, “authentic

autonomy)” (ibid, para. 4).

This programme of deconceptualisation is a project with a number of components. First, it seeks to detach itself from the lexicon of contemporary social and humanistic sciences. Second, it wants to retrieve and uncover the conceptualisations, terms, and categories of Indian social and political thought and to find and follow its logic(s). Third, it is committed to experimenting with applying these indigenous conceptualisations normatively to theorisations of contemporary India’s actual social and political realities. It is in this context that Rathore has offered in this book a programme of “svarajist political philosophy” (para. 5).

‘Returning to the tradition’ in search of a non-Western epistemology, theory, and methodology has been a complex and challenging intellectual enterprise in India, particularly because of its cultural-relativist, hyper-nationalist, nativist, and racist possibilities. This challenge has been made particularly daunting by the rise of the Hindutva doctrine to the status of India’s ruling party’s ideology. Projects such as Vedic Science, enjoying official sponsorship, seek to promote a particular construction of India’s philosophical and intellectual past as the authentically Indian paradigm of knowledge and the true alternative to Western and Judeo-Christian philosophies and frameworks of science and thought. Rathore is quite aware of this challenge, and it is instructive for us to see how he engages with this difficulty. Before that, let us briefly look at three contemporary programmes of alternative epistemology/theory in the social sciences, postcolonial theory, decolonial theory, and southern theory.

### **Postcolonial Theory**

Contemporary post-colonial theory has a very strong Indian connection, not because some of its key exponents are scholars of Indian origin working in universities in the global West, but because it is a successor to the Subaltern theory group that developed during the 1980s among Indian academic Marxists who had political sympathies with radical rural social movements. The subaltern group, organised around the leadership of Ranajit Guha, a Bengali Marxist scholar, developed a theoretical approach to document, interpret, and understand colonial Indian society and history as an alternative to both colonial and nationalist historiography of colonial India (Guha, 1983). The group’s theoretical paradigm was constructed on a key idea of Antonio Gramsci -subalterneity. Gramsci was a post-classical Marxist thinker of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Indian subaltern project was a programme of writing history from below, from the perspective of the lived experience of the subaltern social classes in India, the rural peasantry and the urban working class. Its innovative research programme, which drew many young scholars in India and outside, enabled the subaltern perspective to emerge by the 1980s as one of the most influential alternative social science strands to have developed from the global South. As Dipesh Chakravarty, a member of the original subaltern research team, later commented, “contributors to *Subaltern Studies* [series of volumes] have

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participated in contemporary critiques of history and nationalism, and of orientalism and Eurocentrism in the construction of social science knowledge” (2000, p. 9). What made the Subaltern intervention significant was the new turn it marked through the innovative approach it advocated for Indian colonial historiography. The exclusive focus of the subaltern inquiry was on the non-elite and subordinate social classes as subjects, or makers, of history.

The founders of Indian postcolonial theory were initially members of the subaltern collective who later moved away from Marxism in a global context in which post-structuralism and post-modernism had begun to offer some radically new ways of rethinking the colonial history. They began probing the epistemological foundations, as well as the consequences, of colonialism. Three important sources of intellectual inspiration for that inquiry were the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said (Chatterjee, 1986 and 1995; Prakash, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2000 and 2007).

The postcolonial theorists made some important assertions about the nature and consequences of colonialism and the West’s overall project of colonising. Colonialism’s presentation of Western cultures, thoughts, and civilisation as the culmination of human progress, paralleled with the denigration of local cultures and civilisations as primitive and in the process of becoming, is one side of the violence of colonialism. In post-colonial thought, this process is described as epistemic violence. Epistemic violence, as postcolonial theorists argued, also saw the imposition of the superiority of European ontologies, starting with Christianity, and then modern science and social sciences, producing hierarchies and power structures of knowledge. Thus, the creation of global epistemic hierarchies has been the other side of the cultural hegemony of colonialism. The third dimension of it is epistemological racism. When more politically-conscious young Sri Lankan researchers complain that they are being treated as mere data gatherers by their theory-building research collaborators from the universities of the global West, they are in fact making a powerful point about encountering, with great unease, epistemological racism as lived experience. European cultural hegemony was fostered by colonial racism, built on the assumption that non-Europeans could never reach the level of progress achieved by the colonial masters unless guided by the superior knowledge and institutions of the already-developed West.

Thus, the post-colonial theoretical project advanced a programme of radically rethinking and reformulating “the forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination” (Prakash, 1992). Post-colonial theory critiqued both nationalism and Marxism that were the first to produce powerful intellectual critiques of colonialism. Two points are central to that critique. First, both nationalism and Marxism reproduced the master narratives that put Europe at the centre. Nationalism may have attributed agency to the oppressed nation, but it reproduced the claim to ‘reason’ and ‘progress’ which guided the colonial project. They were also key to the ideologies and visions of nationalism and nation-states. Marxism’s agents of historical

progress were the working class and oppressed people, but the trajectory of emancipation envisioned by Marxism too had the same ontological assumptions of progress and reason (Prakash, 1992). Post-colonial theory further argued that Marxist movements even in decolonised countries, while resisting colonialism, still fell back on a universalist mode of production narrative that ignored the specificity of the non-western, pre-capitalist economic orders, as well as the specificity of capitalisms outside of the industrial West. In both worlds, nationalism and Marxism would critique colonialism without marking a rupture with the colonial and universalist epistemology. Both, as the critique goes, worked within the foundationalist epistemologies of Western knowledge.

However, post-colonial theory does not seem to have progressed beyond its critiques and theoretical intentions. One major lacuna in the still-expanding and prolific body of postcolonial theory literature is the lack of effort to enter into a productive engagement with the classical philosophical and thinking traditions of non-Western cultures. While its critique of the Western traditions of philosophy and theory are becoming ever sharper and sophisticated to the extent of being obscurantist and elitist, the reluctance to suggest (even tentatively) modes of thinking, arguing, analysing, and theorising that are grounded in South Asia's radical-egalitarian legacies of philosophy and social thought continues to be the weakest point in Indian post-colonial theory today. That has left the intellectual space open for all hues of hyper-nationalist interventions we now witness proliferating in India.

### **Decolonial Epistemology and Thought**

Decolonial thinking has originated mainly with a group of Latin American scholars, chiefly Enrique Dussel, Walter D Mignolo, Ramon Grosfoguel, Arturo Escobar, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Most of these Latin American scholars were initially Marxists, who later shared the subaltern programme of the South Asian Marxists. They also had their radical philosophical antecedents in Latin American liberation theology. The two groups of subalternists parted company in 1998, after a conference at Duke University, USA, where the Latin American subalternist group critiqued their Indian colleagues for not developing a really subaltern epistemology and theory. Ramon Grosfoguel remarked of the South Asian group,

Despite their attempt at producing a radical and alternative knowledge, they reproduced the epistemic schema of Area Studies in the United States. With a few exceptions, they produced studies about the subaltern rather than studies with and from a subaltern perspective.... The South Asian Subaltern Studies Group's main project is a critique [of] Western European colonial historiography about India and Indian nationalist Eurocentric historiography of India. But by using a Western epistemology and privileging Gramsci and Foucault, [sic] constrained and limited the radicalism of their critique to Eurocentrism. Although they represent different epistemic projects, the South Asian Subaltern School privilege [the] Western epistemic canon



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overlapped [sic] with the sector of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group that sided with postmodernism (2011, 1-2).

The new concept of decolonial was initially an attempt to go beyond both the decolonisation perspective which the legacy of Frantz Fanon had produced, and the subaltern perspective which the South Asian post-Marxists had advanced. Decolonisation, as the Latin American decolonialists argued, while critiquing colonialism, still shared a vision of human progress based on the master image of the modern European nation-state. Coloniality, in the present world system, is colonial situations without colonial administrations. Colonial situations refer to cultural, political, economic, ethnic, sexual, and epistemological conditions of domination. In Grosfoguel's words, "in these "post-independence" times, the 'colonial' axis between Europeans/Euro-Americans and non-Europeans is inscribed not only in relations of exploitation (between capital and labour) and relations of domination (between metropolitan and peripheral states), but in the production of subjectivities and knowledge" (2013, p. 75).

The search for alternative epistemology needed to learn from and go beyond the limits of the subaltern and post-colonial programmes. According to Grosfoguel, a truly alternative epistemology should be a rejection of all epistemic fundamentalisms, including Eurocentric (and, we may add ethno-nationalist) ones that are built on the premise that there is only one sole epistemic tradition from which to achieve Truth and Universality. It should also be a truly universalist – that is, a pluriversalist – project that does not claim universality. Grosfoguel postulates three premises on which such a pluriversalist epistemology could be built:

- (i) A decolonial epistemic perspective requires a broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon (including the Left's Western canon);
- (ii) A truly universal decolonial perspective cannot be based on an abstract universal (one that raises itself as the sole universal global design). It would have to be the result of the critical dialogue between diverse critical epistemic / ethical / political projects towards a pluriversal, as opposed to a universal, world;
- (iii) Decolonisation of knowledge would require taking seriously the epistemic perspectives / cosmologies / insights of critical thinkers from the global South, thinking from and with subalternised racial / ethnic / sexual spaces and bodies (2008: 3-4).

According to Grosfoguel, postmodernism and poststructuralism as epistemological projects alone are of little help because they are imbricated within the Western canon, thus reproducing within its domains of thought and practice a particular form of coloniality of power / knowledge. The decolonial proposal is to broaden the range of sources that are available to build a pluriversalist

epistemology. Latin American decolonial scholars looking at the links between modernity and coloniality work with a range of hermeneutical possibilities offered by critical theories of modernity and postmodernity, South Asian subaltern studies, Chicana feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and African philosophy.

The decolonial project's pluriversal hermeneutics is constructed on these epistemological claims. Walter Mignolo has argued in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995) that hermeneutics in Western genealogy of thought names a particular type of reflection on meaning and interpretation within one cosmology- Western cosmology. When we search for a new epistemology that seeks to counter the Western Universalist – one wordlist – epistemology, we need a framework of thought that acknowledges what Grosfoguel calls 'a pluritopic hermeneutics.' Decolonial thought thus argues for a plurality of epistemologies that should inform a social theory that does not claim the right to possess a universal and universalising hermeneutics, as is the case with Euro-centric social theory.

It is this 'pluriversalist' epistemological stand that defines the idea of decolonial. It is anti-colonial in a specifically decolonial sense in that it builds itself on the key premise that cosmologies, and therefore epistemologies, are plural, with equal claims to authenticity. It does not seek universal presence or domination for one strand. Thus, decolonial thought has progressed beyond postcolonial theory. While recognising the need to open a constructive debate with Western philosophers, it has begun to (a) address the epistemological premises of its programme; (b) construct categories of an alternative epistemological thinking in order to effect a philosophically grounded *epistemic break* with the colonial; and, (c) seek epistemic inspiration from contemporary struggles against social, class, gender, and knowledge hierarchies and structures of power / knowledge. We South Asians who are in search of alternative social science epistemologies should take note of this project.

### **Southern Theory**

Southern Theory embraces efforts to bring together the current postcolonial and decolonial rethinking of social science knowledge, with a focus on both epistemology and theory. Therefore, it shares the basic assumptions of postcolonial, decolonial, and subaltern critiques of social science knowledge production and circulation. Raewyn Connell's *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Sciences* (2007) is a key text that brought together the efforts of a number of Asian and Australian scholars. S. Alatas (2006), G. K. Bhabra (2007), K. Chen (2010), Julien Go (2012), and Siri Gamage (2014) (now domiciled in Australia) are some of the scholars associated with the Southern Theory group. Southern Theory scholarship wants to, as claimed by its practitioners,

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- (i) Demonstrate how mainstream institutions perpetuate the Eurocentric underpinnings of foundational knowledge in social science, resulting in a highly skewed and ultimately provincial knowledge of the world;
  - (ii) Call for a departure from social science's historic complicity with colonial violence and subordination of alternative epistemologies - opening the possibility of making social science truly global and its process of knowledge production truly democratic;
  - (iii) Bring together hitherto-marginalised theoretical insights generated by scholars and intellectuals in peripheral regions around the processes of decolonisation, recolonisation, and uneven global power relations (Takayama et al. 2015).

A key argument advanced in Connell's *Southern Theory* (2007) is that “colonised and peripheral societies produce social thought about the modern world which has as much intellectual power as metropolitan social thought” and they have “more political relevance” to non-Western societies (2007: xii). Thus, the Southern Theory group has been working with scholars of various disciplines (for example, sociology, anthropology, and education) to interrogate the field's own modernist and colonial foundations and shift what is recognised as legitimate knowledge. The group has also been working through collaborative initiatives to (a) showcase the intellectual work and theoretical insights produced by comparative scholars and societies working outside Eurocentric frameworks, and (b) develop examples of scholarship, including empirical and policy work, that uses Southern Theory and alternative epistemologies to advance knowledge in the respective disciplines (Takayama et al., 2015, p. 6).

However, the work of the Southern Theory group seems to be held back by its unpreparedness to take its own commitment to alternative epistemologies seriously in philosophical terms. Its practitioners come primarily from two academic disciplines, sociology and education. Their work has not so far made attempts to seriously explore, interrogate, and engage with the philosophical traditions and thought in many societies before, during, and after colonialism. Accounts of these traditions in Connell's *Southern Theory* (2007), the guiding text for many practitioners, are of little help in constructing decolonial or post-colonial epistemologies. The point made by Said Amir Arjomand, an Iranian scholar, about Connell's discussion on the existence and promise of a Southern theory, highlights a continuing shortcoming in the writings of many other Southern Theorists

too – “excessive indulgence in accepting a disparate variety of works from social criticism, constructions of indigenous sociology as well as recognized approaches to economics and social history” (Arjoman, 2008, p. 547).

The real promise of constructing alternative social sciences in the South for the South is unlikely to be fulfilled if decolonial, or self-consciously southern, scholarship continues to revolve around the critique of metropolitan social sciences on theoretical and historical grounds alone, without philosophical reflections sharpened by a dialogue between Western and non-Western philosophies. South Asia provides an excellent location for such a philosophical engagement between the West and the non-West. There is precedence for such a dialogical encounter, in the debates between the Greek Philosopher King Menander I and the Buddhist monk Nagasena in north India around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Reading *The Question of Milinda (The Milinda Panha)* today will enable us to realise that resistance to Eurocentrism in epistemology and theory does not mean non-engagement with Western philosophy. For South Asian social scientists who even in their undergraduate programmes study Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Descartes, and Nietzsche, there is no reason not to study, with equal attention and respect, the work and thoughts of the Buddha, Mahavira, Nagasena, Dharmakeerti, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dinnaga, Sankaracharya, and Kautilya, not to mention Confucius and Laozi of classical China, as well as Al-Farabi and other classical and medieval Islamic philosophers. That would be the beginning of an intellectual culture of philosophical pluriversalism in South Asia.

Nevertheless, both the postcolonial and Southern Theory projects run the risk of not being able to produce a southern social science or alternative epistemologies if they continue to remain within the limits of their historical and theoretical critique. Critique that does not lead to intellectual creativity in the form of conceptual and methodological inventions has only a limited capacity to pose genuine resistance to the Eurocentricity of the dominant paradigms of social sciences and humanities, as well as to their hyper-nationalist alternatives. The writings of the Latin American decolonial group show a contrasting example. Recent work by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (*Abyssal Thinking*), Walter D. Mignolo (*Critical Border Thinking*), Ramon Grosfoguel (*Transmodernity*) are new categories of social science thinking and imagination, displaying a self-consciously innovative, critical,

pluralist, and multiversal epistemology with strong defences against temptations of what Rathore calls “indigeneity without hypernationalism” (2018, para. 8). Postcolonial theory and Southern Theory lack such radically politicised and self-critical epistemological defences.

### **Task in South Asia**

Now back to Rathore’s book and its messages about exploring and building alternative epistemologies. Rathore’s central argument is that there has been an Indian political theory existing independent of political theory inspired by European political science. Now, the task before the decolonial Indian (South Asian) political theorist is not to deploy concepts from Western political thought but from the Indian (South Asian) body of political thought. The decolonial project epistemically requires the discovery of “indigenous categories, concepts and terminology that would allow them to outline distinct traditions and modes of political thinking in the Indian subcontinent” (Gray, 2018). That is why Rathore deploys the concept of Svaraj to provide an account of an Indian political theory. In Rathore’s reworking, Svaraj becomes a concept that allows epistemological autonomy as well.

What is significant in Rathore’s project is that he locates the conceptual category of Svaraj from the politics and practices of the Indian Dalits and B. R. Ambedkar, and not from Mahatma Gandhi, although the latter deployed that concept as a central category of his politics of anticolonial resistance. We must note that the Ambedkarist meaning of Svaraj was radically different from its Gandhian meaning. While Gandhi meant the national independence which would enable the Indian masses to take into their own hands the right to decide their political and social life, Ambedkar located the meaning of Svaraj in the social aspirations of the oppressed Dalit citizens to achieve social equality and social justice by radically transforming Indian social structures. Thus, looking at the traditions of pre-modern political thought in India through the prism of the Ambedkarist conception of Svaraj, Rathore sees the revivalist political arguments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and after as attempts to restore the privileged traditions of the indigenous elites. In line with a vision of radical decolonial political thought in India, Rathore finds in Svaraj a terminology that is rich enough to articulate the thought and experiences of the weakest and most vulnerable communities of Indian society.

Rathore's book is certain to generate a rich conversation in India about building a non-Western social science in India. A hardline Hindu nationalist reaction is certain to challenge Rathore's privileging of the Dalit discourses and experiences as constitutive of a foundation for an authentic Indian political thought. That is where Rathore's assertion that true indigeneity should not be equated with hyper-nationalism or the traditions that the privileged elites had defined for themselves throughout history. The narrow nationalism of the privileged elites should not be taken for authenticity, because it has been a colonising tradition too when it denied plurality in traditions, cultures, philosophies, lifestyles, and practices. Decolonial thought, as Rathore's example shows, should turn its critical searchlight on the indigenous traditions of philosophy, political and social thought, and epistemologies. This is an instance of what decolonial thought describes as subaltern epistemic perspectives.

### **South Asian Epistemologies**

Finally, I want to reflect briefly on the possibilities of how the Sri Lankan SSH communities can participate in this conversation on alternative epistemologies. Despite the widespread neglect of theory, philosophy, and epistemology in Sri Lankan scholarship, there is an emerging generation of young scholars who are conscious of the need to resist global knowledge hierarchies and the power / knowledge structures of epistemic domination. Engagement with contemporary Indian innovations of social science and philosophical thoughts – postcolonial, decolonial, and Dalit – would be immensely beneficial to them. The disastrous consequences of Sri Lanka's isolation from the intellectual cultures of the Indian subcontinent, after the modern nation-state system took over our political and intellectual destinies, are likely to stay for decades to come. One productive way to rejoin the South Asian intellectual cultures, as well as the emerging radical intellectual experiments elsewhere in the world, is to ally with the efforts of discovering a South Asian, not Indian or Sri Lankan, decolonial thought of the radically pluralist kind. South Asian embracing of decolonial epistemology should also argue against granting preeminence to one tradition philosophy, theory, or thought. Its philosophical stand should be epistemological relativism, not epistemological monism. That will enable us to constructively engage with South Asia's plural traditions of philosophy, social, political, cultural, and scientific thought which have been suppressed, ignored, mystified, romanticised, and rendered inauthentic by their narrowly nativist interpreters.

Such an engagement calls for an agenda broader than that of the Indian subaltern, postcolonial, and decolonial projects. Its central focus should be the classical, post-classical, and modern philosophical traditions and social thought that enable us to construct a broad umbrella of South Asian epistemologies, transcending the limits of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European positivist epistemology and its 20<sup>th</sup> century variants that have shaped modern SSH knowledge. These traditions will include strands of Vedic, Buddhist, and Jaina innovations of classical epistemology and logic; the heterodox traditions of Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic philosophies; 20<sup>th</sup> century heterodox Buddhist intellectual movements of India and Sri Lanka; and the reconstructions of the Indian subcontinental traditions of social thought and analysis by Gandhi, Tagore, Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, Narayana Guru, Iyothee Thass, Periyar, and Ambedkar. A South Asianist perspective would also be an antidote to the epistemic hyper-nationalisms and monisms of Hindutva and Jathika Chinthanaya.

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