Epistemic Violence of Colonialism and Nineteenth-Century Bengal

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| Even though colonialism is seen as the political and cultural hegemony of Western nations over the non-Western, leading to colonised suffering due to the draining of resources from the non-West to the West, the tangible manifestation of colonial violence can be seen at the epistemic level, where the hegemonic presence of Western scientific knowledge, discourse, ideology, and ways of interpreting and understanding the world is seen as the only valid parameter for knowing the world. The paper “Epistemic Violence of Colonialism and Nineteenth-Century Bengal” looks at how India suffered due to colonial presence in ways epistemically more violent than what is manifest in most discourse(s) on colonialism. |
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1. INTRODUCTION

Colonial subjects have been characterised as “the Other” throughout history, literature, culture, and philosophy by the West. Gayatri Spivak coined the term "epistemic violence" to catalogue these occurrences. The result of silencing, marginalisation and exclusion of minority groups from public discourse, in simple words, can be termed as the primary causes of "epistemic violence." In her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak first proposed the idea of epistemic violence based on her reading(s) of Michel Foucault on the interplay of power, knowledge, and social control. The central focus of Spivak's essay is the "subaltern," a person who is both marginalised and given no voice. She describes the subaltern class's repression as an act of epistemic violence because it locks them into their oppression by eradicating their knowledge systems, beliefs, traditions, and language as a result of colonial rule.

The modernist endeavour perceived the colonised as savage, barbaric, uncivilised, or semi-cultured to construct the identity of the West as cultured and civilised as the West tries to construct the world in terms of binary opposites. Consequently, othering is fundamental to the construction of the coloniser's identity. The West sustains the process of othering by silencing and marginalising the colonised/subaltern, thereby facilitating its hegemony. Demonstrating the barbarism of the colonised (the absence or erosion of culture) was essential for shaping the European colonial project's conception of civilisation. Hospitals, tribunals, jails, schools, the state, and social sciences exemplify abstract organisations with a disciplinary nature, which materialises the dichotomy of civilisation and barbarism, as noted by Michel Foucault. The purpose of modernity constitutes an epistemic act of violence, as articulated by Spivak, due to the relationship between discipline and knowledge, a concept highlighted by Foucault and subsequently reinforced by Edward Said in the context of how the West constructed the Orient. If violence is characterised as the coercion of one's physical and mental faculties, then both Gramsci and Foucault adeptly demonstrate that power is intrinsically violent. Postcolonial theorists, such as Said, Bhabha and Spivak, have also underscored this notion and built post-colonial theories. Castro-Gomez (2002) further elucidated the project of epistemic violence inherent in modernity within the colonial setting to comprehend the detrimental effects of knowledge imposed against the "colonised Other."

Modernity is a project governing the social world which emerged in the l6th century. Its constructions of power and knowledge are anchored in double coloniality: one directed inward by European and American nation-states in their efforts to establish homogenous identities through politics of subjectification, the other directed outward by the hegemonic powers of modern/colonial world system in their attempt to ensure the flow of primary materials from the periphery to the centre. Both processes are part of the same structural dynamic (Castro-Gomez 277).

Understanding “the Other” is crucial to constructing the Self and, by extension, establishing a colonialist paradigm. The knowledge that “the Other” receives can have various adverse effects, including—but not limited to—distortions, inferiority complexes, infringements, misunderstandings, and the loss or suppression of their voice.

Consequently, Western science is employed and portrayed as the sole legitimate epistemology, with the notions of "validity" and "reliability" as fundamental instruments for asserting universality, authority, and impartiality worldwide. Western ontology and epistemology were constructed to secure an unjust advantage over colonial subjects, suppressing alternative discourses. In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, Marquez identifies this epistemic violence as the fundamental source of Latin America's "solitude." Western Science and rationalism have emerged as the standard for evaluating all other "realities," whether rational or not; hence, the West marginalised the global discourse, prioritising Western science above all alternative methods of acquiring and validating information, knowledge systems and discourses.

The initial years of the British presence in India were focused more on consolidating their territorial prowess, though at the same time, the colonial scholars, such as William Jones and other orientalists, focussed on unearthing the ancient Hindu texts and discourses to go back to the Hindu past that was supposedly lost during the Muslim era or the Dark Ages. In the process of doing so, the Orientalist thrust was more focused on gaining a more profound knowledge of the Indian knowledge system till Lord Macaulay diverted all the funds and attention to make the Indians learn English to produce a class of people “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (359). The epistemic violence the Orientalists and Anglicists unleashed in their attempt to know, map, and rule India has been the object of the present study.

The arrival of the British and other colonial Western nations in India transformed the societal and cultural fabric, as the scientific-rational paradigm of Western progress perplexed the Indian mindset. Despite their resistance to Western forces, they were ultimately unable to withstand the military power of the West and gradually acquiesced to colonial authority. Nonetheless, what is more pertinent in this context is the recognition that, beyond military power, Western (English) education—particularly the influence of Christian missionaries—warrants more significant concern. Before the British colonial authority emphasised the necessity of English education to cultivate a class of colonial clerks (Babus), Christian missionaries instated Western ideologies in Indian youth, fostering a critical perspective towards their history and heritage and facilitating potential religious conversion among Western-educated youths.

It is only with Macaulay’s *Minutes of Education* that the funds allocated for the education of the native Indians were shifted to English Education. Before that, British officers used to learn Indian languages to govern India, and the funds were used to educate Indians in their native languages. The Orientalists’ emphasis on unearthing the riches of the glorious Hindu tradition and its linguistic sublimity had been no unknown fact since the latter half of the eighteenth century when William Jones and his Asiatic Society had been engrossed in unearthing what is supposedly lost in Indian/Hindu culture.

If, on the one hand, the Orientalists were busy identifying/locating and even translating the Indian texts and its heritage into the Western languages, the Christian missionaries were busy converting Indians – where the poorer Indians were lured with material benefits and an attempt to alter the minds of the youths of more affluent sections was done with the English education. In the early nineteenth-century Kolkata, the queues in the missionary schools were proof of the same. The middle-class Bengalis felt that if they had to reap the benefits of the British presence in India, learning the language was the only means to get closer to the British; thereby, a thrust for English education was the norm of the time. The popularity of English education was such that Raja Ram Mohan Roy had to write a letter to Lord Amherst to introduce English Education, and the richer Bengalis founded the Hindu College in 1817 to get a supposedly secular European education. But there, too, the rationalist ideas of Henry Vivian Derozio played a havoc role as the students under the influence of Derozio started questioning the very basis of Hindu traditions, customs and rites, which they could not fathom when they were intellectually initiated to the eighteenth-century European rationalist thoughts. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, one of the early Indian English poets, though not a direct student of Derozio but was influenced by Derozian thought, stated, “I hate Rama and his rabbles” (Madhusudan Rachanabali)

The Western-educated youths were critical of the Indian traditions and customs – leading to some converting to Christianity and the majority being involved in Social Reformist Movements of Hinduism so that the onslaught of the Colonial epistemic violence could be dealt with. If there is a silencing of the colonised with their submission to Western science, ideas and parameters, then on the other hand, there has been a furore of Indigenous championing of the parameters, which could destabilise the Western parameters by “selectively assimilating” (Ananthamurthy) the Western and traditional knowledge systems in a contrapuntal amalgamation (*Hayavadana*) which the western discourses could not sustain for a long term. In the initial days of the evolution of Indian Writing in English – the days of Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt and others, though there was a tendency to imitate the British Romantic Poets, soon the borrowing was limited to only modernise the Indian sensibilities and literary forms.

In *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Ashis Nandy discusses the initial efforts to counter Western masculinity/martial strength by celebrating *khastriyahood*. He also discusses how the colonised Indians reacted to the homology between sexual and political dominance, which led to the colonial Indian conceptions of "purusatva" (the essence of masculinity), "naritva" (the essence of femininity), and "klibatva" (the essence of hermaphrodites—androgyny). Nandy characterises homology as "a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolised the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity" (27) within its domain. This is how the masculine Occident seeks to rule the feminine Orient: by projecting its masculine ideals upon the latter. Because the veil acts as a barrier between the East and the West, the West becomes more attractive as a means of exposing the East. The rejection of men's psychological bisexuality in many parts of Western culture provides the rationale for this masculine celebration, which in turn "beautifully legitimised" the post-medieval model of brutality, exploitation, and supremacy in Europe. At first, the British showed great regard for Indian culture. However, as colonialism took hold in the middle of the nineteenth century, glorifying masculinity became the norm. As a reaction to this celebration of Western masculinity, *ksatriyahood* became "the exclusive indication of authentic Indianness" to Indians (Nandy 7).

Michael Madhusudan Dutt reaffirmed the conventional gender roles in Hinduism in his writings. The demons Ravana and his son Meghnad became mighty male contemporary heroes in his magnum opus *Meghnadbadh Kavya*. In contrast, the previously revered Rama and Laksmana became feeble-kneed, passive-aggressive, feminine antagonists. This was "a direct response to the colonial situation" (Nandy 20). So, according to Nandy, traditional Indian masculinity's recessive and fettered aspects became prominent due to colonialism. For example, Madhusudan's "aggressive criticism of Indian traditions was in the style of the major reform movements in India: it was not merely an attempt to explain Indian culture in Indian terms, or even in Western terms, but was an attempt to explain the West in Indian terms and to incorporate it into the Indian culture as an unavoidable experience" (Nandy 22).

Simultaneously, there are the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterji, who wrote novels and articles to downplay the significance of the critical Hinduism model and instead highlight the Christian traits inside Hindu history, which gave Christians what seemed like an advantage. According to Ashis Nandy, Swami Vivekanand and Swami Dayanand Saraswati were harshly critical of Hindus and appeared to have inherited Western principles (24). Despite Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's best intentions, the traditional Hindus saw his brand of Hinduism as dangerously similar to their own and, hence, as a threat to their way of life. (Nandy 28)

As a result, colonialism had a significant effect on India, causing cultural upheaval, psychological displacement, and severe economic exploitation. However, "the long-term cultural damage colonialism did to the British society was greater," according to Ashis Nandy. To begin, the brutal social Darwinism—or "survival of the fittest"—was openly sanctified by colonialism. Additionally, it contributed to the misconception that all Britons were culturally the same. Once again, colonialism fostered an inflated sense of self-importance among the conquerors. However, when the British Empire collapsed, the "Edwardian twilight" hit hard, and the realisation that Britain had its own West led to widespread Westernization (Nandy 35)

Thus, if, on the one hand, the colonised were reacting to the Western homology of the preference for the masculine over the feminine and thereby celebrating the *Khstriyahood* to counter the Western martial strength, then on the other, some scholars like Tapan Ray Chaudhary believe that western impact on India was similar to a catalyst, as he writes, “Like a chemical process … the result was no simple synthesis, perfect or imperfect, of two different traditions nor an uncomplicated triumph of one culture over another. It was a new product essentially different from the indigenous inheritance and the elements of Western civilisation, which impinged on it. Bengali religious sensibilities in modern times are striking end products of this catalytic process” (99).

Tapan Ray Chaudhuri is only partially accurate in his assessment of the reforms as a catalytic impact of Westernization. In addition, during a catalytic process, the catalyst does not change. As Ashis Nandy demonstrates in *The Intimate Enemy*, Western influence instigated some shifts in Bengali society and culture during the nineteenth century rather than acting as a catalyst. Although it may have influenced evangelism, the widespread conversion in rural Bengali communities cannot be considered a consequence of Westernization. But if one turns their attention to the city centre, especially to the then Calcutta, it was the other way around, brought about by introducing Western scientific and rationalist education to India in the early 1800s. The study's epicentre was the Hindu college. Nonetheless, the college had a secular perspective; the young people's exposure to Western rationalism caused them to doubt the rigidity and superstitions of Brahminical Hinduism. In nineteenth-century Bengal, alternative beliefs emerged due to this animosity towards Hindu orthodoxy.

So, to speak of West and Western education as a catalyst (Ray Chaudhary) is to think that Indians were unaffected by their engagement with the colonial forces and the missionaries. The role that the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) of the colonial regime played in subjugating and silencing the minds of the Indians and thereby asserting their hegemony is the most violent aspect of colonialism, which Spivak and other postcolonial scholars have termed as the worst form of violence – the epistemic violence. The native elites’ fascination for the Western parameters, knowledge and ways of life to become one like the West, much like Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s sighing for the “Albion’s distant shore”, had impacted their minds to such an extent that even today we do not accept our ways of knowing as not so valid as the Western means. Like Marquez, who made the Latin Americans realise that the crux of their solitude is in understanding how they have been made subalterns vis-à-vis the West, we need to understand that to fight against Eurocentrism and establishing our epistemologies of knowledge is the only means by which we can fight the West and get a voice of our own.

To conclude, attempts to modernise according to Western standards and knowledge systems invariably result in the marginalisation of the colonised. Contemporary science significantly contributed to suppressing marginalised communities as the Other through the knowledge it produced. Spivak posits that the incapacity to engage with elite academic writing precludes specific individuals from articulating their problems, rendering them “subalterns.” The rationale is that those in positions of authority (the West, in this context) have modified their communication approach to attain hegemonic privilege(s) and provided superficial empathy to the other who was relegated to the position of the subalterns. The process of othering through Western epistemologies has served as a principal instrument of colonial violence, often overlooked due to the prominence of military force and its visible consequences. This form of violence, akin to "unheard music," is more insidious and unjust than what is observable to the naked eye.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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