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Salmoli Choudhuri

Moiz Tundawala

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A Case for Humanistic Theory

SALMOLI CHOUDHURI, MOIZ TUNDAWALA

This article responds to a debate in *Economic & Political Weekly* on the state of theory in Indian academia. While earlier interventions focused on the “who” and “how” questions related to the subject and work of theory, a more fundamental question is addressed here: Why theory at all? In our age of permanent crises, the necessity to make a case for theory that can interpret the world rather than change it for the good has arisen due to the dominance of problem-solving and solution-driven approaches adopted by the social sciences.

In the first two decades since the turn of the millennium, *Economic & Political Weekly* has twice carried in its pages a vibrant intellectual discussion on the state of theory in India. It began with Gopal Guru’s (2002) provocative distinction between “theoretical Brahmins” and “empirical Shudras” in Indian academia, and a call for Dalits to become the subjects of their own theory. Sundar Sarukkai (2007) responded by highlighting the radicality of Guru’s ethical demand of theorising based on lived experiences as opposed to the Habermasian construct of philosophy as a purely detached pursuit of reason. While recognising the significance of Guru’s intervention, Sarukkai, however, differentiated between the ownership of experience and the authorship over its articulation, and probingly enquired if conflating the two was at all tenable. This is not because of philosophy’s avowed objectivity, but the necessarily partial and particular relationship between the subject and the phenomenon of experience as such. The next reflective engagement with theory brought together Prathama Banerjee, Aditya Nigam, and Rakesh Pandey, who collectively ruminated on the process of theorising ideas and practices across thought-traditions and time-spaces (Banerjee et al 2016). Side-stepping trite binaries such as east/west, universal/particular and tradition/modernity, they proposed the contemporisation of thought beyond the immediate context in a way that it possessed traction extending into our own time.

If the initial debate asked, who was the subject of theory, the later deliberation focused on how to do theory. But in the third decade of the 21st century, Indian academia must encounter a challenge which is more fundamental than the who and how questions associated with the theoretical enterprise. Living in a time that is being darkly characterised

as “an age of permanent crisis,” marked by the repudiation of liberal and democratic consensus and irreversible climate change, when existential survival is itself perceived to be in grave peril, at a very elemental level, the question that intellectual work has to grapple with today is: Why theory at all? In other words, if the need of the hour is prompt action for the effective solution of global problems, what is the point of the slow and time-taking task of theorisation that can at best interpret the world rather than change it for good?

In this article, we make a case for humanistic theory which is in crisis due to the domination of the social scientific method in academia today. The practice of doing theory as such has historically been a non-starter in postcolonial India, where education was essentially rendered serviceable to the economic and social purposes of the nation state. Setting aside the identitarianism of the left and anti-intellectualism of the right, our proposal is to retrieve the idea of universality and think it afresh as opening up newer possibilities both for theoretical work as well as emancipatory politics.

What Is Theory?

Before proceeding further, it is imperative to elaborate our idea of theory, the space for which is fast disappearing, squeezed out by the attention that the social, political, and economic realities around us are claiming. The term “theory” goes back to the ancient Greek expression *theoria*, referring to the process of understanding a theatrical spectacle through observation and interpretation. In conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott’s (2004) view, theorisation involves an unconditional and continuous quest to render something intelligible for its own sake without an instrumental purpose. While this may be the most commonplace formulation of theory, the question that becomes pertinent is how its basic impulse to demystify the world is distinctive from the method of the natural sciences. If the scientific approach helps in explaining the workings of the material world, it can certainly be extended to an

Salmoli Choudhuri (salmoli.choudhuri@nls.ac.in) teaches at the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru. Moiz Tundawala (mtundawala@jgu.edu.in) teaches at the Jindal Global Law School, Delhi NCR.

objective and dispassionate study of human behaviour as well. In fact, it is precisely such an attitude that the social sciences adopt, geared as they are to offer a causal explanation for phenomena observed in human societies, and develop patterns and categories through which these can be further illuminated.

Despite its enduring appeal, this social scientific way of doing theory entirely decentres the humanistic world that operates in an altogether different register of thought, belief, and feeling. Rather than studying human behaviour as an empirical phenomenon, a humanistic theory would centre stage the meaning-making capacity of the subject itself. This is because the human condition is irreducible to a scientific examination of the cause-and-effect relationship between human conduct and social processes. Instead, it involves a world-forming disposition enriched by culture and imagination, which can be theoretically appreciated only through a robust engagement with philosophy and humanities.

Taking the instance of societies where religion enjoys ubiquity in the collective imagination, humanistic theory will refrain from studying religious observances in a positivist vein, and in contrast, interpret the manner in which human life itself becomes meaningful through their mediation. In certain faith traditions, people worship god as a formless and invisible being, with their life structured around this divine entity that cannot be accessed through ordinary sense perceptions. For other communities, where gods take a more concrete, tangible form of images and idols, the devotees move beyond the materiality of these objects to see a manifestation of divinity in them. Be it the invocation of a god which is physically absent or finding the excess of divinity in images and idols, a humanistic reckoning with such religious experiences shows that there is more to reality than what meets the eye.

Although we have chosen the example of religion, these dimensions of absence and excess that are incommensurable with a purely materialistic understanding of reality pervade all spheres of human life, including art, literature, law, and politics. In keeping with the visual

import of *theoria*, the Indo-Islamic terms, such as *nazariyya* and *darsana*, both of which signify ways of “seeing,” capture the core idea of theory well which entails the practice of looking for more than what is given in the field of reality, and yet is constitutive of the world of human imagination.

We must clarify, however, that humanistic theory does not proceed with the understanding of the human as a fully autonomous and rational actor in a world that it has itself determined. The human in question is very much embedded in a pre-existing social context, while being divided as a subject in a psychoanalytic sense between the propensity to belong and the propensity to be free. Far from disregarding the important questions raised by the Anthropocene, this subject-oriented thinking does not assume human superiority over the non-human world. Rather than considering the latter as an ensemble of enumerable entities in a social scientific way, humanistic theory reconstructs the two in their interrelationship that gives rise to feelings of wonder, amazement, reverence, and horror.

Theory in Crisis

There is serious apprehension in progressive Euro-American circles today about the crisis of theory in relation to philosophy and humanities, as the critical and reflective orientation of these disciplines is not in sync with the priorities of the neo-liberal capitalist order. Any education that does not contribute to the enhancement of vocational and technical skills valuable for the market economy is considered wasteful and extravagant. While these concerns find parallels in India as well, especially with the enunciation of the National Education Policy 2020, public discourse is concentrated not so much around the death of humanities but on the changes and revisions in textbooks and curricula driven by a hyper-nationalist state. But far from enjoying a protected status in the academia, it would not be entirely incorrect to say that the project of humanistic theory has been a non-starter ever since the birth of the postcolonial state in modern India.

To be sure, public life in late colonial India was vibrant with wide-ranging philosophical debates, not so much among professional academics but rather involving participation of the most influential political actors of the time, on fundamental questions of selfhood, sovereignty, religion, and caste, integral to collective imagination in modern India. Although the university space was designed to produce middle-class professional elites in service of the colonial state, anti-colonial experiments in education such as those initiated by MK Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore operated at a distance from the gaze of the government. They played the role not merely of an ideological opponent to the British empire, but crucially facilitated the reimagining of an ethical and creative subjectivity.

Whatever possibilities had opened up for an autonomous life of ideas got foreclosed in the nation-building exercise after independence as education came to be tied up to the developmentalist agenda of the new state. Given their interpretive and speculative nature, which was not compatible with the needs of the hour, humanities and philosophy took a back seat against the other social sciences grounded in data analysis and archival research.¹ The latter, especially subjects such as economics, history, and law, were deemed to be more serviceable to the statist aspirations of transforming the social lives of destitute millions. If economics paved the way for state planning in the welfare era, history supplied ideological justification for secular nationalism, while law schools emerged later with the avowed objective of producing “social engineers.” This is not to deny the high quality of state-supported academic writing bearing allegiance to disciplinary conventions, nor to discount the stellar work parallelly carried out by independent scholars. Rather, our point is that due to the close nexus between the state and the social sciences, the practice of humanistic theory never took off in postcolonial India.

Today, however, the social sciences are themselves under siege as we have a very different political dispensation in power which does not value intellectual work of any kind. Commentators are

alarmed by the waning culture of academic freedom in higher educational institutions and the systemic undermining of public archives and centres of independent research. The establishment, of course, has an abiding interest in the project of rewriting history, but this is only because of the subject's enduring popular life outside professional spaces that has rendered it into a site for the contestation of political battles.

We believe that such a disregard for the social sciences is symptomatic of a deeper problem of anti-intellectualism in the age of authoritarian populism. This, though, is not a peculiarly Indian condition and has a wider global resonance affecting the left as much as it does the right. If the previous generation of postcolonial scholars disliked Jawaharlal Nehru and ignored B R Ambedkar for their unapologetically modernist proclivities, activists of the present day denounce Gandhi and Tagore for their ambivalence on the question of caste and tradition. Outside India, in a recent incident, a Black professor with impeccable anti-racist credentials was called out and boycotted by teenage high school and college students attending his seminars for the "harm" he caused them in failing to treat Blackness as the singular form of social oppression in the United States. Palpably shocked by this experience and continuing to defend the political principles that motivated the students, he wrote that the culture of toxicity resulted from their lack of patience with ideas and difference of views, both of which are imperative for a seminar-style discussion as opposed to unreflective sloganeering in politics (Lloyd 2023).

Why Theory?

This anti-intellectualism in our times has resulted in the displacement of the arduous work of theory with the convenience of identity politics, which simply takes recourse to the language of community rights and wrongs to address issues that are more systemic and structural. We do not deny that there is a crucial difference in the way identities are deployed by the right and the left globally, and particularly in India, between the identitarianism of Hindu nationalism

and "low-caste" movements. While Hindutva thrives on a politics of hatred and resentment, Dalits and Other Backward Classes are mobilised by deeply felt injustices of the hierarchical Brahminical order that continues to determine social life in India even today. More importantly, this progressive form of identity politics supplies a necessary antidote to the ill-founded elitist confidence in liberal individualism which was not enough to ensure a life of dignity for oppressed groups and communities.

However, although identity provides a sense of selfhood and recognition to those who have historically been treated as virtually non-existent, it cannot be a genuine substitute for individual and collective freedom, which only becomes possible through a serious engagement with theory. An over-reliance on identity runs the risk of making the "self" entirely dependent on the authority of the "other" in the form of state or society for its own recognition. What is more, an exclusive assertion of selfhood thwarts the prospects for building solidarity with other oppressed groups independent of state and social power. Seen in this light, Hindutva's selective outreach to the lower castes, including the recent overtures to Pasmanda Muslims and Dalit Christians, is nothing but an instrumental co-option of subaltern identities for its larger ethnonationalist project. Far from inheriting the rich legacy of the dignity and self-respect movements in India, this opportunistically inclusive electoral strategy ends up disaggregating disadvantaged groups, as they seek alliances with the ruling regime for short-term political benefits rather than forging solidarities based on shared vulnerabilities. Only a theoretically reflexive attitude of the kind we are proposing makes it possible to look beyond the immediacy of our particular interests towards a universalist politics of collective emancipation.

Burdened by the history of colonialism, theoretical practice in the Indian subcontinent has oscillated between the tendency to be derivative of European thought on the one hand and, contrarily, to express its own unique indigeneity on the other. Despite their apparent tension, both these positions commonly associate universality

with Eurocentrism which is either extended to other particular contexts or rejected altogether as an alien imposition. This predicament received a more sophisticated treatment in critical theories of difference propounded by postcolonial and anti-caste scholars drawing upon post-structuralist deconstruction and phenomenological experience, respectively. But as difference was accorded primacy, social context acquired centrality in a way that engendered complacency regarding the work of theory itself.

If the practice of doing theory is to be renewed in the Indian academia, our proposition is that rather than abandoning universality, it must be rethought afresh to foster a creative emancipatory politics in the modern world. Much is lost in reducing universality to a European civilisational inheritance, which is either to be dispersed throughout the globe or resisted for the sake of cultural authenticity.² More than an intellectual property of a particular thought-tradition, universality gestures to what is missing from the immanently oppressive reality of every given social order (McGowan 2019). Thus, activating the republican ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity hitherto unavailable in the *ancient régime*, the French Revolution made a bold declaration of freedom which has in form inspired successive waves of revolutionary movements ranging from Black Haiti to Bolshevik Russia and Communist China. Far from laying down a predetermined content, the concretisation of universality is left to the agency of the political and ethical actors involved in every situation and event. Since the universal cannot be simply equated with the content of high values and their global circulation, and is instead associated with that which is missing from reality, it can only be grasped by those who do not fully belong to the social order or at least identify with the position of "non-place" in the society.

In a BBC interview of 1953, when Prime Minister Nehru, attending Queen Elizabeth's coronation only seven years after India's independence, was asked by the *New Statesman* editor, Kingsley Martin, why there was so little resentment in India towards the British despite the

not-so-distant history of colonisation, he responded thus: “Well, partly we do not, I suppose, hate for long or intensively. But chiefly, I think, because of the background that Mr Gandhi gave us during all these past decades” (BBC News India 1953). But distinct from Gandhi’s standard portrayal as a non-violent pacifist, what Nehru imbibed from his political mentor was an openness of imagination which refused to see the British as a racial or national enemy, and instead offered a universalist critique of colonial capitalism as a system of exploitation from the standpoint of “a *pariah* of the Empire.”³

Tagore too set up his international university, Visva-Bharati, in a colonised country far away from the Euro-American negotiating tables of power to offer a non-parochial and universalist idea of India whose possibility arose precisely from its place of marginality (Choudhuri 2022). Although speaking in respect of a different problem, Ambedkar espoused a radical politics of anti-caste universality from his Dalit subject-position, lacking a home and being a part apart in the Indian society governed by the Hindu caste order (Tundawala 2019).

While it is undeniable that these thinkers pursued divergent and irreconcilable intellectual projects, what brings

them together is a deep preoccupation with a non-identitarian non-sociological way of theorising universality. But the problem we face today is the disappearance of universality from our theoretical landscape, accompanied by a deep distrust for theory itself. Although there is a sharp political divide between the homogeneous nationalism of the Hindu right and the politics of heterogeneous difference favoured by the progressive left, both these positions strikingly converge in their aversion for the universal as a colonial and Euro-American legacy. As we have shown, however, universality is not to be confused with any ideology that legitimises domination. Rather, in touching upon the absence and excess that underpins ordinary everyday reality, it is both a generative ally for theoretical work as well as the only mode and medium for emancipatory politics.

NOTES

- 1 Amit Chaudhuri (2020) reflects on how “a humanities without philosophy” made “literary criticism a branch of the social sciences” and “responses to the arts ... sociological.”
- 2 Shruti Kapila (2013) has written on the globality of ideas beyond the influence–response and exchange–circulation models.
- 3 For a different approach not entirely distinct from ours, Faisal Devji (2019) argues that Gandhi offered a constellation of non-universal concepts, such as non-violence, that were

bereft of positive character without being particular or singular.

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