

Research Report

Inescapable Reflexivity for Social Science Research in India for Now: A Personal Dialogue with the Lived Contexts of Anthropology

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Abstract - This is a reflexively critical account of the lived practices particularly of anthropology that might stand broadly valid as well for other social science disciplines in most of the Indian Universities except a few elite ones. This is because the ways the dominant discourses of institutional learning in postcolonial India—more particularly of ‘science’ disciplines—persist as foreign to and outside our everyday lived realities that their disorienting consequences surface more pronouncedly and specifically in higher education. The writing materializes my *becoming* of a site of dialogues regarding why, how and what might be the urgent reflexivity about the “decline narrative” in ‘social sciences’. The reflexive responses, nonetheless, are selective about the themes that I consider salient. They include: (a) how and why we need to accept our ‘reality’ as ‘hybridity’ that is assumed to complete and compete for the full circle of going global (‘western’) and then to create the ‘real’ differences in the research outcomes; (b) the reflexively critical journey beginning with where and how we stand in field research by *merely ‘being there’*; (c) how we might redraw the possibilities of social science in India and finally (d) why and how the ambivalence of hybrid in-betweenness might help us speaking out ourselves. Thus, we cannot escape how we, like most of the postcolonial nations, unwittingly moved to the stabilising singularity at pre-neoliberal order that hardly could disembody us from the enduring ground of reflexive everydayness, even at the rise of neoliberal unstable multitude.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Social Science, Anthropology, Dialogue, Hybridity, Ambivalence, Postcolonial, *Merely being there*, Fieldwork, Knowing/Becoming, Neoliberal, Education

This intra-personal *dialogue*¹ is principally *for* people like us, the social science students and scholars of institutions of higher education in a postcolonial country like India. Certainly reflexive about ‘*intersubjectivity*’ in and of lived research, the writing materializes my *becoming* of a site of the meanings of what is claimed in the title. I, inclusively an anthropologist, am already *another* author on this issue, in dialogue with similar others, thus making their utterances *dialogically* mine (Bakhtin, 1981). Those who would further, if at all, be engaging with the dialogues in this context would expand the site of utterances more diverse, different (*polyphonic* and *heteroglossic*²) and productive in the sense of hitherto absent meanings and rhetoric (Bakhtin, 1981). Becoming one of the students, researchers and teachers of Anthropology in a university, which was one of the earliest (1857) and the largest ones in colonial India, I belong *here* and *now* to the thought that reading/writing is a process in which the whole *historical subjectivity* of the reader/author is implicated (Kress, 2010). For the said reflexivity on certain issues of social science research I need to state that my writing would allude to this dialogue with my personal history. My critical exploration would constitute what *surplus* I *see* (Holquist, 1990) now to what I and the dialogic other did not notice and are yet unable to see. I would intervene in those fragments of institutional learning, more particularly of social science, in order to rethink its gap with (what I see) globally hegemonic capabilities of doing/understanding research now. I mean understanding as ontological (Gadamer, 1989/2004 following Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world), but as ‘to become’ rather ‘to be’. Language is always in the process of becoming. (Bakhtin, 1984) Thus, my reflexive argument is not locked in the binary of optimism-pessimism or their degrees. Rather, I find myself and those numerous students and budding researchers in the movement of productive ambivalence and ambiguity that are inescapably negotiated in the postcolonial

¹ Emerson (1997) narrates Bakhtinian dialogue: *By dialogue, Bakhtin means more than mere talk. What interested him [...] was the idea that each word contains within itself diverse, discriminating, often contradictory “talking” components. The [...] more contexts it accumulates and the more its meanings proliferate [...] Understood in this way, dialogue becomes a model of the creative process. It assumes that the healthy growth of any consciousness depends on its continual interaction with other voices, or worldviews.* (p. 36).

² Polyphony is the multiplicity of voices, whereas heteroglossia is what helps differentiating many individual voices that makes hybridity as tightly related to polyphony and heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1994)

horizon between systemic annihilation of past ('self') and chasing *mimesis* (Bhabha, 1994) of what we were not (colonizing 'Others'). It has led always to new space-time simultaneity impregnated with "both and also" those *hybrid* possibilities (Soja, 1996 :11), many of which with merely mimetic blindness we have misrecognised serially, but no way exhausted all, especially the newer ones, yet to be recognised. However, we might reach dialogically those new *hybridities* (Bhabha, 1994; Bakhtin, 1981) between (our real) self and Other in the ethical search for the languages that might speak us as we really are. We need to recognize that we are the *halfies* (Abu-Lughod, 1991) or postcolonially localized western (provincial/different) (Chakrabarty 2000) permanent nomads. This theoretically unstable hybrid (i.e. Bakhtin, Bhabha, Soja, Abu-Lughod, later Foucault and Gramsci too) rendition of the introduction is not to make it difficult, but to introduce the difficulties encountered by the fragments of lived experience of social science that are addressed below.

The Dominant Discourse(s) of Institutional Knowing or Becoming in India

Since my earliest remembered days as institutionalized learner in school, the *doxic* submission to 'science' disciplines as hegemonic over other disciplines became an accumulatively universal, yet compartmentalized and complex discourse. That discursivity, however, of something to be 'achieved' differentially by the students³, thereby differentiating the students, was external to and made elite to our commonsensical everyday way(s) of experiencing materiality. The 'Other' disciplines (e.g. languages, history, geography and others) representing 'social' (the term 'cultural' being either secondary or absent) sciences and/or humanities (connotatively the latter being less prestigious and valued) hid ambivalently their differences from 'sciences' by similar isolates of unyieldingly yet uncritically structured, seemingly universal (i.e. as if, scientific) rhetoric. It was all too different from the language to embody our everyday 'social' in varied contexts. In the discourses of institutional learning, the students internalized 'scientific truth' as external (thus detached), real, universal, testable, transparent and 'modern' (or

³ I would only be (re)presenting the people of middle class Indians, either discretely classified as 'lower-', 'average' and 'upper' or all with fuzzy boundaries.

modernizing). Science(s) is (are), thus, made most authentic, axiomatic and *doxic* in understanding anything else. Under its 'naturalising' hegemony, differences of other disciplines were inscribed with the labels like 'easier', 'less difficult', 'requiring less merit', 'descriptive', solely 'memory dependant' and less 'valuable' as well. The same homogenizing discursivity of learning for higher education legitimized the elitism of the science and technological disciplines, thereby normalising the incommensurable hierarchic differences among the clusters of disciplines. The 'good' students of science (and technology later) in achieving bright professional career might never bother about their lack of strength in language and literature, but when the reverse is the case for 'good' students of 'arts and humanities', they are supposed to be happy only with some 'suitable' professions. The dilution of the hierarchised 'Others' of science and technology has also been reflected in the subfields of social sciences. For instance, in Psychology, Geography, Anthropology and Economics, the subfields loaded more with experiments, mathematics, statistics, and instrumental measures naturalisingly acquire higher status than the other subfields. Akin to the applied value of technology, the subfields termed 'applied', would become upscale in 'value' of learning any disciplinary social science. All such intra- and inter-disciplinary differences were rarely provided with any hint about when, why and how they emerge and change over time. Simultaneously, those constructs of pedagogic communication became popular to the students that could connect them easily to every compartment and across compartments, but not beyond and behind them. Such a historicity of (social) sciences were negotiably consolidated, rather than reflexively challenged.

The 'words' that colonized and directed the priorities in higher studies of Indian social science till the end of 1980s were principally heritage, development, progress, planning, policy, caste, minority, women, public health, education, modernization, capitalism, socialism, feminism, unity-in-diversity (with 'nationalism' at the back-stage and debated), integration, employment, cooperative societies, backwardness and poverty, industrialisation, basic needs, rural development, self-reliance/self-sufficiency (of nation), and some more. The liberalization scenario might appear only to be supplementing the former vocabulary with a longer list of phenomena, like good governance, New Economic Policy, decentralisation, participatory democracy, public-private partnership, corporate

social responsibility, NGO(isation)s of development, genders, feminisms, sustainability, ecosystem (rampantly anywhere), globalisation, knowledge society, self-help group, capabilities, human development, diversity and conservation, multicultural/pluralist society, Information and Technology, efficiency, anti-corruption, anti-terrorism, citizenship, subaltern, HIV-AIDS, human rights, ‘e-’, ‘post-.....’, ‘inclusive’ and relatively lasting many others. But it is now a vortex of dialogues, relatively unprecedented and sudden rush of growing multitude. The academic field encountered a rapid swing from the ‘past’ of mere institutionally enforced almost binarily deterministic ‘ideologies’ of ‘hope(lessness)’ to the strangely decentering flow of informational ‘present’ of institutionally provided inadequate interpretive fragments and indeterminacies. It has unwittingly moved from the banal linearity to incorporate the troubling, almost schizophrenically plural waves, similarly external to the actually lived realities. Quite alike the past, for the students of social science in Indian higher education, the present resonates some exterior, disembodied and dominant discourses, maybe ideologically charged yet inescapably making individuals ambivalent before the drifting social space of intrinsically alienated academy and unreflexively embodied lived personal spheres. The ‘subject matters’ remain similarly disengaging and uncritically received ‘outsiders’ compared to our hand-on lived everydayness. Unsurprisingly, learning social science as instrumentalities of mimicking could obviously never give way to critical-reflexive practices and dialogic plurality in research. It did let the researching subjectivity be born as an active double without own ‘body-mind’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), not as any embodied capability to rethink and reflect, at least, what, why and whether they were mimicking.

It is not irrelevant to liken (post)colonial Indian (patriarchic) subjectivity that has been interpreted as an Indian self to preserve the distinctness/exclusion of spiritual, sovereign ‘inner’ domain. This distinctness is supposed to become greater if one would need greater success in ‘out(side)er’⁴ ‘material domain’ (Chatterjee, 1993: 27) of science, technology (and why not social science supportive to that success) and other ‘material’/professional sphere, in contrast to ‘domestic’/sovereign (liberating) sphere (e.g., religion, ‘traditional’ womanhood and so on). But such speculation of growth in both (by mimicking

⁴ As coded above as ‘external’, ‘outsider’, ‘exterior’

the ‘outer’ and conserving the ‘inner’) does not stand if we misrecognise the ‘outer’ as completely independent of ‘inner’. At each different ideological dialogue, the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, as conceived by Chatterjee (1993), were and are invariably hierarchical along with the mediating interface. The simplest example would be in public and private spheres of the Indians, both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ domains are embroiled with each other in an obvious direction of the ‘inner’ (i.e. Indian domestic) taking to the ‘outer’ (western ‘otherness’) that needs approval of the locally varied patriarchic choices in both the spheres. It means that postcolonial Indians also chose to mimic the coloniser’s language in the ‘inner’ domain, an example of the numerous is the metaphor of *Ipe family* in Roy’s (1997) classic *The God of Small Things*. The diverse ambivalence of the postcolonial urban Indians toward “inner” and “outer” in both public and private spheres led to the classified reifying markers to identify individuals, groups and even communities with respect to ‘how much’ one is Indian, western and modern. Such simulacral ‘ourness’ and ‘theirness’, majorly arising from institutional pedagogic praxis, have displaced the urgency of reflexive dialogues with everybody’s lived realities that might enliven ‘Our’ subjectivities with numerous ‘differences’. They might be capable ‘ourselves’ for bricoleuring and articulating praxis of the inescapably hybrid ‘differences’ always on the move to see and speak out what else we see more of ‘theirs’ or simply as ‘ours’.

Talking psychoanalytically, disentangling the authoritarian ‘outsider’ from the deeply embedded nationalism would be realistic if we could and still can reconcile the historic blunder of taking recourse to ‘their’ rhetoric of an intriguing utopia in the name of ‘fraternal patriarchy’. It was a fantasmic trap planted before the variedly ailing populaces that all newly sovereign nation-states are equally fraternal among themselves and also with ‘Other’ nations (Pateman, 1988; MacKinnon, 1989) with no real differences. The ‘phantasy’ was to ingrain the same discourse(s) and erase the possibility of any new discursivity of (in)equality and (non)difference among all postcolonial nations. The *eros* of owning the same mother(s), the ‘new’ nations pervasively left off the painful alternative of finding out no ‘own’ mother for owning; rather it could happen, they were always already free to create m/any mother/s as they had lost their ‘own’ fathers since being colonized. As ‘Real’ alternatives to the dominant discourse(s) or ‘their’ Fathers, those oedipal possibilities

are only blurred, faded, marginalized, silenced, but hitherto very much there in lived everydayness to speak out themselves. There is no point in lamenting for how and why the nations, like India had similar fate in ‘material’/‘outer’ domain, but, hopefully with variedly ‘different’ discursivities of ‘inner’ that would not be merely a compartment or component of the same discourse which was not ‘ours’. Only we need to get embed in the everyday discourses to make sense of the real ‘hybrids’ (i.e., be it ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ or ‘mother’ and ‘father’) that could be no less fertile as the *third spaces* of enunciation with completely new meanings. Similarly, what Bhabha says in Rutherford’s interview:

For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge. (Rutherford, 1990: 211)

That ruling discourse would remain always outsider and external that couldn’t be purely ours. Denial and misrecognition of hybridities (‘Being’) and hybridization (‘Becoming’) in discourses/dialogues of research and writing would keep us, the Indians, the students of social science in postcolonial India, never speaking out ourselves. Let us move to few anthropologically missing dialogues, blinded sights and unreflexive practices that keep the students at bay.

At the Gate of *Merely Being There* and the ‘Fieldwork’

Way back in the beginning of the millennium, the undergraduate coursework in Anthropology (honours/major) of Calcutta University incorporated all the major anthropological theories, concepts, research methodologies. Replacing one fieldwork in the whole three-year coursework, it introduced fieldwork in every year based on rudimentary practice of ‘participant observation’, considering it essential for anthropology. The familiarity of the students with the theories and methodologies has been enhanced indeed. At odd with their growing capability of exploring and analyzing societies/cultures, till the end of ‘Post-Graduate’ (masters) course, they are primarily happy about fieldwork for ‘only being there’—no way to confuse “being there” in the sense Geertz (1988) interpreted it (e.g. none reads book usually)—among some unknown (preferably exotic) fellow Indian citizens, more particularly in any rural setting. Even after exemplifying the uses of theory in

the narrative of fieldwork I have rarely come across any student who might ‘naturally’ raise the most pertinent questions regarding the relationship among theory, methodology and ‘fieldwork’. While they are told the relationship, they silently evade it as somewhat ‘new complications’. They are seen not even asking themselves whether, why and how not only “being there”, but “with the people”, with the way (i.e. why) the people “are” (i.e. not have ever been and thus how to use constructivism, if relevant) and the people “could be” by then (i.e. critical understanding) might surface at the center of field enquiry. Before and even now, most of the students are comfortable with the representation of some instantly overt matter of fact. Letting the tradition of the fieldwork of “only being there”, without any reflexive-critical probe and with the certitude of a safe one-dimensional space, the product of the fieldwork culminates in targeted “thingification” of the people by documentation and linear description. The ‘things’ are told to be ‘verified’ by multiple checks in order to prepare a singularly ‘true’ and ‘valid’ report by all the students. Such invariability is introduced with the ‘household survey schedules’, the starter of the fieldwork. The students are made to wish the verified ‘information’ seemingly has ever been the same, however with always occurring minor or outlying changes. Such a fieldwork necessarily and preferably presupposes schedules of questions for (pre)‘structured’ interviews and (uncritical) observation for systematic (read instrumentist) data (read information) collection and reporting those targeted ‘facticity’ embodying the people.

Not even they could be urged for thinking why, what and how the peoples interacting with the students might vary through themselves while they write the study (i.e. the issue of reflexivity). I have checked how deeply such reflexively mediated narratives vary across individual students while they are assisted to position themselves on their lived personal situatedness and to introspect on their field experience ‘data’. But after any fieldwork, it would entail a series of very long minute dialogues with the methodologically capable supervisor for every student that again would need through transcription, analysis and writing. Quite understandably, our ‘third worldly’ university infrastructure has *yet* not been able to afford such a task in the dense coursework and scarcity of faculty members. Practice of reflexivity being completely denied and irrelevant in fieldwork, the ‘report’ of

only the ‘verified’ information (i.e. preferably from more than one source) every time leads to the ‘double denial’ of their personal experiences and engagements with the very discourse of inquiry. The fieldwork is reduced to the target of certain segmented⁵ structure of information *on* the people, lying out there in the physical setting of the field. The silencing of interactive, dialogic and critical processes of collecting those ‘information’ is ‘naturalised’. Usually, transcription, coding, memoing or any scopes of reflexivity are ruled out from such ‘systematic’ reporting of fixity. The laboring students implant the idea that only those information are the sole and legitimate products of their labour. To reiterate, their personally lived experiences would not be use-worthy or thought-worthy. Thus, unknowingly every time, the most ingenious realm of their fieldwork remains impervious to their own realisation. It does not imply that while being communicated the above understanding in dialogue with their particular experiences, the students cannot respond successfully, but it is lost in their next fieldwork. This ‘fieldwork’—why not to call it a sort of all-the-same cultural tourism, fixed on ‘authentic’ ‘evidence’ and contextual austerity against consuming luxury of any leisure trip, sneaking through and knocking the doors for ‘what’ the students are presupposedly to collect as the ‘data’—becomes far away from the theoretically informed and methodologically reflexive practice. Rather, such a reified ‘tradition’ of a cultural tour might well be subject to theorization or urgent need of further reflexivity. Even, there are no consciously experienced binary of ‘object(ive)’ and ‘subject(ive)’, only a single reality lying out there to get at by seeing and asking people, who are supposed to ‘possess’ it in isolation. Thus, asking precedes observing for what the ‘heard’ (by the researcher-student) stands in a linear singular structure. The students are guided to make out ‘a reality’ as linearly explicable ‘matter of fact’. They are, at large, not at all comfortable to accept ‘incommensurable difference’ or undeniable contradictions in the ‘same thing’ that they study (read target). They are likely to accept that findings/measurements might differ only due to difference of variables. But they are made incapable to understand that the ‘same thing’ might be analysed in many ways with

⁵ e.g. first, population account of gender, age, education, occupation, family property, land holding educational status and marital status; others mainly include kinship, politics, religious issues, economy or occupations and development issues or government schemes, all in isolation from or unrelated to neighbouring others

different theories to reach entirely new things and many realities at times. They do not feel to explore the differences in experiencing a phenomenon by persons placed at different social locations (e.g. gender, class, community, culture, age group, relationship to each other and other social roles), temporal positions (of engagements) and interactive contexts that is analysed above. On the top of them, it seems beyond their realisation that any perspective (i.e. to avoid the term theory: emergent, critical, transferable or whatever) finally makes us see things particularly and relationally. And every research is a specific context-dependent production of institutional (knowing or unknowing) practice of perspectives situated in certain temporal networks of both academic and non-academic forces. They recognise only the universality of measurements or descriptions of something 'generalisable' and fail to analyse anything distinctly particular (i.e. ideographic). In other words, the reified practice either obliterates the researcher's (inter)subjective uniqueness and distinct experience of particulars or makes particular as merely a sample/part of a general and universally applicable structure. This sort of methodological essentialism has a complex history of its own that cannot be addressed in a simplistically made critical account of the 'colonial mediation' of seeing what is to be seen as 'object' *aka* version of 'positivism'.

The Possibilities of Social Science in India

As understandable from the above narration, while writing or talking anytime about social science research, I feel to go against grain of any generalising account of field research available in many renowned articles, book chapters and books on social science research and more particularly of qualitative research. Simultaneously, I can't escape my specific Indian postcolonial Bengali middle-class backdrop, my academic concerns and situatedness with our seniors, contemporaries, junior researchers, students and all that hold us in relation to research in my multi-contextual simultaneity. I register 'inescapably' that we need to be reflexive about how to reach that single plane where the triad of every addresser, addressee, their intersubjectivity or their relatedness operates at any point of time and space for a clearer understanding of the particular voices with their always expanding differences and diversity (Bakhtin, 1984). Any single utterance to become an encounter of voices we need

what Bakhtin analyses of carnival as the “debates which did not permit thought to stop and congeal in one-sided seriousness or in a stupid fetish for a definition or singleness of meaning” (Bakhtin, 2003: 132). We, the Indian students and fellows of research need to identify the numerous such ‘carnivals’ almost at every step of research for becoming the participants. What do we need to identify and participate in them? My personal dialogues with the people of Anthropology and related social sciences in India—though not many, and all the authors I read, despite at times being non-entity for one or the other—have guided me to reach that everybody’s ‘plane’ of *carnivalesque* in order to make unstoppable debates (Bakhtin, 1984). It is quite similar to that we the middle-class urban Bengalis practice in *Adda*⁶ (Chakrabarty, 2000). It becomes a space, in both the senses of ‘place’ and ‘utterances’, for indulging ‘dialogues’ (Bakhtin, 1984) of within-group relevant issues. It regularly likens to all other issues in the same continued dialogues, preferably never enforcing any singularity or consensus and never concluding any enmity among the participants. The space of *adda* is always in motion, *dialogic*, *hybridizing* and *heterotopic*⁷. The scene might be the commonplace for the vibrant academicians, though not perhaps that about enmity. What is needed to be a participant of an *adda* is to be ‘one of them’, i.e. somebody capable to understand and respond to the others in a communicative genre. Whether subjugating or resistant or negotiating, one needs to become in the discourses.

Thus, such ‘real’ dialogic space present in local everydayness might help us reconnecting dialogically with the globally hegemonic capabilities of understanding/doing research to negotiate with them. We, the anthropologists of a postcolonial nation like India, need to accept that like the participants of *adda*, any academic participant cannot be original, singular, but always already hybrid, not because from below and back we have to earn capabilities like those capable above and ahead, but because all speak hybridities.

⁶ “Roughly speaking, it is the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations.” (Chakrabarty, 2000:181). Chakrabarty does not include in this rough, minimal explanation the happening and relentless debates of *addas*.

⁷ “real places [...] are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, [...] in which the real sites, all the other real sites [...] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault, 1986: 24)

What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it [at least]two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages”, two semantic and axiological belief systems’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 304).

Rather, we, the Indian researchers would cherish for our hybrid meanings that are yet to be born and anticipated to enrich the innumerable dialogic spaces. Since inception of the colony, we are already intersubjectively implicated in the meaning-making relatedness, already invited as addressers and addressees, but we have wasted our potentials in unwitting replication of the colonizers. The wastage is much more than expected. But that does not mean, there is any pre-given fixed pathway to travel for any amount of time to respond ingenuously to the invitations or to find others responding to ours. The whole process of self-reflexive identification, self-empowerment and avid participation in the discourses of social science in general or anthropology in particular, rest on that praxis of reflexivity, dialogues to be critically conscious of our consciousness. It might look similar to quoting Deshpande (2008, 28, italics added) here: “We need above all to cultivate a critical self-reflexivity – an awareness of who “we” *are* and where we *stand* when asking and answering such questions.” However, Deshpande situates self-reflexivity in a broader sense of social science research in India. While reflecting on and accepting “the “decline narrative” ... [as] so much a part of the Indian higher education scene today” (Deshpande, 2008: 25) in connection to social science research capacity (Chatterjee, 2002) and the fourth review of Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Deshpande tried to bring out certain criteria and questions to evaluate the scenario freshly. They include the scrutiny of certain alarming absences, call of the hour, lack of priority of practice, lacking professionalism, ‘thought experiment’ with the alternatives, new social composition of the people in higher education, changed institutional regime of social science research in India. In all, it insists the leaders of social sciences to reposition themselves. Srikanth (2003) critically reinterprets identity politics of the marginalized Indians as response to the indifference of state to be necessary element. It counters the central argument of Rajen

Harshe and Sujata Patel (2003) about identity politics impacting on social science researches. I would like to highlight Harshe and Patel (2003: 527).

[S]ocial science scholarship has degenerated into utilising simplistic forms of theorizing, based on binary opposites, such as male versus female, braminical versus dalit, Hindu versus Muslim, modern versus indigenious, caste versus class, state versus civil society together with such opposites based on language and religion. ... In effect, populism is rocking contemporary learning processes in Indian social sciences which is full of oversimplified interpretations of social processes.

Whatever shifts are indicated by the above two contending views regarding the change of social science research, (re)generative and degenerative included, the students of the higher education in India—at least till the introductory stage, be it tenth, twelfth and undergraduate one—are communicated only as some ‘taken-for-granted’ and uncritically ‘stable’, ‘basic’ and ‘universal’ constructs that might update knowledge with some supplementary alterations. The urgent concern of learning social science research institutionally in India requires deeper introspection and dialogues than confining its critique within the terms like ‘positivism’ ‘logical positivism’, ‘naïve realism’, ‘scientific realism’, ‘empiricism’, ‘objectivism’ and so on. None of the above has been rigourously practiced in research in most of the universities and institutes of higher education in India. When the students come across the concepts, as is the case in anthropology’s present masters’ coursework, they remain texts out there in the books and ‘materials’ to be memorized primarily and finally for examination. Similarly the fate of the ideas of ‘epistemology’, ‘ontology’, ‘rhetoric’, ‘values’, ‘ethics’ and logic., if at all communicated to the students, are kept not as anything to do with essential research in practice. The genealogical spread and the individual condensations of all the above prepotent simulcral discursive practices of social science at different space and time (i.e. particular departments, particular network of researchers, particular disciplines, etc.) have been (re)producing the unwittingly traditional mimicking, state-intervened and other dogma-blinded practices. They are obviously competing in the respective (Bourdieuisean) ‘fields’ (i.e. of learning, teaching, researching, etc.) to secure more ‘capitals’, thus power, in order

to hegemonise over others. The ‘fields’ were/are classed, gendered, ethnicised, regional, localized, casteed, state-focused, and so on both as indicated by Harshe and Patel (2003: 527) and countered by Srikanth (2003), but they were/are more or less identifiably patterned that I elaborated above. It is true as well that any radically informed hybridizing social science practice poses threat to the above safety-net of institutionalized patterns of higher education in India and suffers most. But the current issues (i.e. in local hybrid scenario of neoliberal shift in education) are more complex than assumed this way.

In order to jump into the ‘present’ I would like to add interpretations of a yet unpublished research, tentatively titled as “Recalling our institutionalized learning and doing social research across our personal times in India”. Without elaborating on the methods and results of the study with ninety eight social science students and research fellows, half of whom are girls, who secured highest, middle and lowest ranks in examinations of my and two adjoining universities, I would pursue how that simulcral discursivity turned to be flexible, yet ambivalent replication of the past in the face-to-face encounter with the radical shift of education as public good to private property.

Ambivalence in the Dialogues with the Present

The radical shift of dialogic meaning of the ‘present’ education is more polyphonic than ever. At the level of individual citizens, obviously not disengaged from their families, there are several individual hybrid voices, but differentiating them at each micro levels (i.e., heteroglossia) is highly difficult. For instance, a student in public institution (e.g. government university) while deciding to become an academician at different turns of her/his career, faces ambivalence toward and finally negotiate between all pervasive costly private coaching or risking the ‘scores’ at any grade of education without it. If those gainful shortcuts in procuring academic success are indispensable, why one would at all to go for the alternative i.e. only classroom learning and study at home, which is only useful in costly private institution that again, provides mostly ‘professionally’ oriented disciplines and skills, not general disciplinary studies. Thus, one has to choose between the two future possibilities. For the students of either type, while there is surplus time, what more cost-effective skills should she/he acquire for a better career and what is that better: to become a

wealthier consumer or not essentially adding to the capitals for competition in professional life? If there are high cultural capitals available in family or similar immediate setting the students are safe to pursue the alternatives of vivid, guided readership and high ‘scores’ in all ‘entitlements’ irrespective of studying in public or private institutions of higher education. For such students of high merits, their ‘spirits’ of ‘higher’ study most often look for better infrastructure and higher skills under more capable supervision in the ‘West’. Therefore, there are numerous ‘grids’ that produce the shifting ‘groups’ of the students (Douglas, 1982) willing for academic profession. But unlike ‘past’, classical and stable hierarchic classes or groups the question is whether might the ‘present’, a horizontally competing globalised virtual academia of ‘social science’ be a game changer?

Before concluding my reflexive dialogue as shared with our colleagues and student researchers, who might badly grope for coming out of certain confines (*habitus*) of practices let me come back to the “Recalling our institutionalized learning and doing social research across our personal times in India”. While going through the transcripts of depth interviews with the research participants, I elicited that the earlier dominant discourse has not been volatile, rather giving support to the neoliberal emission of possibilities in higher education. Despite the pervasive paradigmatic shift of education from public good to privately purchased commodity, it virtually lost any origin because of ever invisible postcolonial synchronicity of the existing discourses (i.e. earlier state-dominated and later neoliberal) with competitive market and relative silencing of the ‘Other discourses’ (privatizing education earlier and later private education now or the ‘Other’ of neoliberal) as they were made always swaying while standing as hegemonic by the (postcolonial) elites (west-collaborator: earlier bipolar, now unipolar) on top. The variant discourses were never effectively challenged neither by huge majority at grassroots nor any significant fraction of elites as I have elaborated above. Nevertheless, under the current overarching global hegemony of ‘scales’, ‘scores’ and ‘consumption’, five major ambivalences of learning in higher education, some being overlapping and not exhaustive in themselves though, I have tentatively constructed as the following:

- (a) **The Agencies of Academic Choice:** As the choice of a discipline since undergraduate level is now done in a network of various sources of information, it is

a current issue whether and how far the students themselves would increasingly play the decisive role rather than their parents, senior relatives and friends did in the past. The ambivalence—more the issue of autonomy is escalated, more those agencies of the past and added new ones intervene to save the individual students from neoliberal uncertainties—decisively keeps the choices idiosyncratic. It is similarly, but no way identically, classed, gendered, ethnicised, regional, localized, cased, state-focused, and in addition to being based on the neoliberal values, steeper and many-sided competition.

(b) **Academic Choice for Identity**: The individuals get ambivalently split between disciplines returning quicker professional value for higher and longer consumer identity and low-cost disciplines of lasting academic value, but with chances of low consumerism. The choice is again negotiated in less predictable manners than the past of fewer options of negotiation between academy and profession.

(c) **Priority of Pedagogic Popularity**: There is no unequivocally popular pedagogy. The priority is irresolutely timed between that for lasting academic values and the values of academic and professional success. The calculative efficiency of negotiation also varies across the merits of the individuals for targeting the classes of eligibility for the desirable jobs. This is again unlike the past that attributed hardly any flexibility of priority.

(d) **Choice between Knowing and Earning**: The issue is to negotiate among (i) learning for knowing more along with contributing to knowledge, (ii) learning calculatively for earning more and soon and (iii) learning for higher social positions across time.

(f) **Flexibility in Ethics of Learning**: Pragmatic negotiation with the earlier ethics in institutional learning include the overriding decline of and intolerance to intensive readership, yet labouring for the purpose of securing effective grades of entitlements.

Compared to that in the past, the swings of values and practices today constitute some cosmetic alterations of the same institutionalized process of learning and evaluating the learners. The individual learners are now in direct and fleshy encounters with the (neo)

liberal market. Since postcolonial period those students who could adapt better to the sequentially shifting languages from 'basic' to 'difficult' and 'diverse' might seek fortune in exclusionary process of becoming 'good'. It is the same central institutional discourse that labels either 'average' and 'below average' as well. The criteria for the labels of the students are debated and kept flexible with priority given to the measure like consistently high scores and profitable entitlements. The institutional judgments/evaluations on the adaptive capabilities of the students developed around such 'outsider' discourse of learning is standardised with respect to itself only, thereby striking out any urgency of engaging the subjectivity or agency of the students and researchers as critical and reflexive about it. The idea of 'self' or 'subjectivity' of the researcher--considered by many scholars as fashionably underscored in recent theoretical trends of social sciences—remains only one trendy narration in the texts without arousing any essential reflection in research practices and researchability. In a nation like India, apart from exceptional, and countable cases of self-establishment in the exclusionary, discontinuous, elitist constellations of scholarship, dissolution of 'subjectivity' into the compulsive forgetting or denial of self and mimicking the old standard that would never to become their own is the regularity. Earlier the students of social science were to look for 'suitable' jobs in the segmented and somewhat limited academic and administrative market that was controlled by the nation-state. Presently, it is yet an ambivalent space of instrumentalising the discourse suitable to open and uncontrolled market undergoing everyday retrenchment of the state mediated by supra-ordinate globalizing forces. Institutionally, reflexivity of the individual researcher's self/subjectivity could hardly locate any dualist distinction from 'objective' or any critical engagement to reflect on that instrumental experiences and its alterities. Since postcolonial (maybe colonial) time, such discursive disengagement of self/subjectivity is so deeply embedded in institutional research practices of the rank and file of social sciences in India that it has led to another institutionalized paradox of a malproductive learning of texts. Even now, with few exceptions, for the leading mode of evaluations of the students, the ditto language of the texts is the ideal one to memorise for scoring better, not its improvisation in student's own language. Thus, written examination had yet to incorporate plagiarism and the efficiency of writing in own words into its vocabulary. It does not

identify memorized copies from the textbooks as plagiarism and does make it legitimate practice. It might be a choice of certain elite institutions to opt out plagiarism from the learning practices, but not yet a generalised compulsion of higher education. Except use of mathematics, statistics and hand-on practices of the research skills it has altogether displaced the focus of learning from assimilation and independent growth to memorization of typical structures, contents and representation of the same. But the same story of success apparently continued for a further contradictory split of communication. In the recent years of globalization, those who adapt better to communication (for example for the professions of information technology, management and so on) are supposed to get the premium of 'business success' irrespective of the grades of institutionalized educational entitlements. They enter the exclusionary process of becoming good-better-best for the market. The management oriented institutions of teaching and research (and yes already potentially other social sciences' research as well) have been compulsively importing, imparting, prompting and promoting the hand-on skills along with exhaustive studies of research and 'applications'. For instance, I think that without assimilating western philosophies in relation to the theories—be it of ancient, contemporary analytical and /or continental traditions—,mathematics and statistics, it is impossible to (re)produce international research and publication standards in any social science, more particularly anthropology. Never facing any serious challenge, the social science research practices at the grassroots in India, usually suspend any effective interrogation of the consensual conviction about the practiced 'routinisation' and 'normalisation' of research as near the best feasible format for learning and doing research. Only our 'quotidian' desire for the resistant and alternative responses to the messianic free market present, simultaneously unavoidable submission to the same might be that '[t]hird Space of enunciation' (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996), the 'in-between' space of *ambivalence* and *hybridity* of our everydayness. These spaces might be both personal and public, ludic and academic to bring the dialogues back to its fertile ground of creating and contributing new meanings as per global standard with the paradoxical possibilities of challenging the same. Thus, the liminal space is always a site of symbolic interaction, one which prevents polarising and dichotomising through the dissolution of binaries. The 'present' can no longer be simply envisaged as a break from or

a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a harmonic presence: “our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities” (Bhabha, 1994: 4). It is an “interruptive, interrogative and enunciative” (Bhabha, 1994: 4) space of new forms of producing cultural meanings that blurs the limitations of existing boundaries and calls into question established categories. We need to look for that *hybrid, dialogic, heterotopic* ‘third space’ as an ambivalent site where cultural meanings and representations have no ‘primordial unity or fixity’ (Bhabha, 1994), a space where the Deleuzian notions of the ontological primacy of becoming are effectively played out.

Thus, as also interpreted before, responding to the always already present third space provides the possibility of something ‘different’. It means those ‘differences’ of senses and sensibilities of our personal or enmeshed collective or political reflexivity that would make our contributions to ‘knowledge’ different and new. It might not be the time of Prem Chand or Sadat Hassan Monto to dream for a different nation evading the traumatic birth of India or Pakistan, but it might be the time for different global south/India, where heterogeneity and resistance both count to be reintegrated after liminal proliferation. Let us not repent for those possible deliberate collaboration with the ‘West’, dialogic hybridization and creation of the new in order to welcome all those germinated in the ‘third space’. Finally the meticulous readers, if any, would be back for dialogues; would create newly as ever how such narratives were generated without authors (leaders); would historicize how those texts deconstruct responsibly and answerably themselves without originary traditions.

Conclusion / Confession

I would like the people in the grassroots of social sciences to read it, because like all my contemporary university colleagues, I have spent a lot of time for and with my students and colleagues and because the writing invites varied (dis)agreements. Learning with my students competitively and competently was to make the negotiation with my ‘lagging’ past easier. My (weak) linguistic capability and (lack of) strength of winning over time barely helped me dreaming for anything ‘high’ for myself. I easily quit thinking of any rise in *career*, rather tried for envisaging career as both minimal and maximal. It was to be a Point,

*Aleph*⁸ (i.e. the point in space that contains all other points), not essentially needing bodily movement, but belonging to all the movements of course. What I did actually do in opening to the dialogic plurality would be elaborated in any next writing. But while understanding each (but not after understanding each) of the texts, I consider it a full and real time and space to swim around all the reachable corners bringing the pieces of lived experiences to illustrate them. It is, nonetheless, difficult though, I play a critical game to feel the dance of bricolage⁹, where there is no hierarchy of *longue* and *parole*, signifier and signified, between signifiers, but all in the same surface, one after the other, ‘different but proximate’, the same, but not identical, twisted rhetoric, where all knowledge of this knowledge are interpretations of interpretations, *Geist*¹⁰ of the *geists*, *Dasein*¹¹/Being of the beings, traces of traces.¹² For me, so far, it is always becoming new through interdependently arising differences. They are nothing but the negatively defined traces in terms of conceivably ‘real’ rendering of emptiness/nothingness (e.g. Buddhist Nagarjuna’s Madhyamika or in-the-middle school of *Sunyanata*¹³ or Sankara’s *Brahman* or non-difference in and beyond *maya* or differences) in its very becoming. The world is always becoming real, irrespective of whether the world relatively exists.

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⁸It is one of the stories in the book world famous *The Aleph and Other Stories*, first published in 1949, and revised by the author, Jorge Luis Borges in 1974.

⁹Characteristic patterns of thought (Lévi-Strauss, 1966)

¹⁰ According to Hegel, *Geist* a union of opposites, a prefigurement of spirit as the unity in which contradictions, such as infinite and finite, are embraced and synthesized. According to Hegel, the goal of Spirit is Freedom. A Hegelian reader might say that a process of increasing freedom already *is* in a dynamic sense the full actuality of freedom.

¹¹ Heidegger’s study, however, was of a specific type of Being, the human being, referred to by Heidegger as ‘Dasein’, which literally means ‘Being-there’ (Solomon, 1972). By using the expression *Dasein*, Heidegger called attention to the fact that a human being cannot be taken into account except as being an existent in the middle of a world amongst other things (Warnock, 1970), that *Dasein* is ‘to be there’ and ‘there’ is the world, a figure on the ground. To be human is to be embedded and immersed in the physical, literal, tangible day to day world (Steiner, 1978).

¹² In deconstruction (Derrida), the idea of difference also brings with it the idea of trace. A trace is what a sign differs/defers from. It is the absent part of the sign’s presence.

¹³ It means emptiness residing in the principle of origination in interdependence and freedom in the duality of the extremes of ‘is’ and ‘is not’.

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