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Competing Knowledges: An Indian Perspective

Abstract: A comparative assessment of Indian philosophical traditions with some of the western traditions may appear a tempting enterprise. However, the semantic positioning of the concepts forming the foundations of the two respective traditions poses a formidable challenge in bringing the two together within a single framework of abstractions. The difficulty is compounded by the colonial history of unequal power positions impacting philosophical traditions. However, the rapid shift from imagination to memory in technology and knowledge-transactions in recent decades, and the profound changes taking place in the nature of human cognition, may provide us an opening in this direction in future.

Zusammenfassung: Es mag reizvoll erscheinen, die indische Philosophiegeschichte mit einigen westlichen Traditionen zu vergleichen. Allerdings stellt die semantische Verortung von Kernkonzepten, die die Grundlagen der beiden Traditionen bilden, eine außerordentliche Herausforderung dar, wenn es darum geht, die beiden Traditionen in einem einzigen Vergleichsrahmen zusammenzuführen. Diese Problematik wird verstärkt durch die Kolonialgeschichte, deren ungleiche Machverteilung die Geschichte der philosophischen Traditionen zusätzlich prägte. Dennoch könnten die rasante Verschiebung von Fragen der Kreativität zu Fragen der Archivierung in den Technologien der Wissensübertragung und die gegenwärtig stattfindenden tiefgreifenden Veränderungen der menschlichen Kognition in Zukunft Forschungsmöglichkeiten in diese Richtung eröffnen.

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In attempting any comparative study of the Western and Indian knowledge paradigms, a great difficulty one faces is that meanings of the concepts basic to such a discussion are not exactly identical in the two traditions. Terms like 'gnosis', 'logos' and 'philosophy' used in the West are translated in many Indian languages by using terms like '*gnan*', '*vidya*' and '*darshan*'. 'Philosophy', for instance, refers to a perspective for approaching a set of questions and a logical framework used for understanding a given phenomenon (such as 'existence', 'universe', 'knowledge', 'reason', etc.); but '*darshan*' is closer to vision or the *process* of viewing rather than the *view* itself. The difficulty is further compounded by the continuous shift every few centuries, on both sides of the knowledge communities compared in this essay,[1] in the semantic associations constituting these terms. For instance, 'Veda', initially meaning 'knowledge',

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[1] Some sections of this essay are based on Devy 2017.

started indicating 'articulation of knowledge' towards the end of the Vedic period around 500 BCE. Given these two formidable difficulties in the field, a comparative view has to rest content with achieving the limited objective of providing overviews rather than offering any great insightful interpretation of the mutual correspondence. My limited objective in this essay is to present the general outline of various views on what constitutes knowledge as they developed in various eras of India's long history and point out the difficulties in using these views and interpretations in contemporary time as well as using them for drawing connections between Western perspectives on knowledge. However, this essay is not intended for declaring foreclosure of the attempts by cultural comparatists. Hence, I shall finish it with a brief discussion on the recent technological impetus to break the traditional memory structures as a basis for specific concepts of knowledge, which enable us to possibly build new structures, hopefully, universal in character, transcending competitive differentiations.

Ever since the modern west came in contact with India, the scholars in this area have been copious and have produced a vast amount of literature on the Indian culture and traditions. Even a cursory survey of all of it would require several volumes. Since making such a survey is not the purpose of the present essay, I shall not venture into commenting on the available corpus of such work. However, as a point of take-off, I allude to Friedrich Max Müller's *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879–1910). He was quite generous in complimenting the wisdom found in ancient Indian literature (Müller 1882: 10). However, the superlative adulation of the India of his imagination was not commonly shared in scholarly circles and he was an exception among his European contemporaries and peers. The overwhelming majority of European administrators, scholars and researchers of his time had internalised the idea that the British rule was necessary for 'civilising India', a divine duty fallen upon them which they had accepted as a moral burden. These views, whether negative or superlative, inevitably influenced the self-image of Indian thinkers of the time. Similarly, there was a great excitement and acceptance of 'English education' throughout the nineteenth century; at the same time, a dismissal of Indian forms of knowledge was also common among the native literary class in India. The rapidity with which European learning was introduced in Indian colleges and universities through the second half of the nineteenth century led Mahatma Gandhi, during the 1930s, to take a rather uncharacteristic reductive stand with an oversimplified 'for' or 'against' attitude in relation to the condition of education in India.

A century later, if one has to take a relatively more objective view of the colonial impact on India's knowledge traditions, two significant elements deserve mention. The first of these is that the pervasive cultural amnesia about India's intellectual failures and accomplishments seems to have hampered the Indian scholars' ability to establish any organic links between the past and the present.[2] For the last two centuries, Indians have either entirely dismissed all that it had cultivated as 'knowledge' in

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2 For an extended discussion of this topic cf. Devy 1992.

theory, together with a million everyday tasks, or they tend to think that ancient India had all knowledge in all domains and consequently glorify that imagined past. The second element is the frequently noticed 'time-lag' between knowledge in the west and that in India, and the absence of parity between the knowledge production in the global west and the global south. There are several other countries such as Ireland, Canada and Australia, which too had to fight the western attitude of disapproval of the knowledge coming from the former colonies. But the intensity with which Indian scholars have felt such a dismissal has generally been more acute. However, though the colonial experience can be justifiably held responsible for India's disproportionately low contribution to 'knowledge' during the last two centuries, focusing on colonialism alone may not perhaps yield the complete story of our failure.

For completing the story, one must turn to the text of a lecture that B. R. Ambedkar – a formidable scholar, mass leader and the architect of free India's Constitution – was to (but could not) deliver at Lahore, and which was published in the form of a book under the title *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). Ambedkar presents in this work a scathing analysis of social inequalities prevailing in India for over two millennia and a passionate plea for a genuine equality. Dr. Ambedkar was certainly the most educated of the Indian leaders of his time with degrees from Columbia and the London School of Economics. 'To educate' the deprived classes for creating an equitable society was one of his non-negotiable articles of faith. Ambedkar's analysis opens up the 'knowledge' question in India, taking it beyond the easily available proof of culpability of the colonial domination, and right to the ancient times, when various theological schools inscribed discrimination as a social norm in India. There is no doubt that the caste discrimination in the past and in the present as well as the colonial cultural domination and the continued 'knowledge imperialism' of the west both have their share in reducing 'knowledge' in India to pauperisation, and 'education' in India to a savage mockery of the idea of education.

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At this stage, I would like to take up the question of what is 'knowledge' as understood in some of the Indian philosophical schools. In the language of philosophy, it is one of those eternally contestable concepts. Its meaning appears to have changed from century to century and from civilization to civilization. What the ancient Babylon and Sumerian people considered knowledge was by no means even half acceptable to their Greek and Roman successors. If the Greeks based all of their sciences on the firm belief that the universe is cubicle in shape, the Europeans after Kepler and Copernicus based all their sciences on the completely different belief that it is cyclical. In our time, 'knowledge' has more or less entirely rejected those axioms and ideas arising out of them. The term used for describing any profoundly fundamental shift in the

very basis of a given body of knowledge is 'epistemic shift'. Despite these periodic epistemic shifts affecting what constitutes knowledge, there has been a relatively steadier idea of 'knowing'. That is to say, knowledge as a 'verb' (which grammatically it is not) is far more constant in its connotation than knowledge as a 'noun'. In this essay, I shall be using 'knowledge' in its verbal sense.

The pre-colonial philosophical thought in India – beginning with the *Upanishads* and passing through the metaphysical and non-theological *darshan* (schools), Buddhist, Jaina, Sufi world-views, the Bhakti literature and folk traditions – is replete with interpretations of what 'knowing' involves. The *Bhagwad-gita* devotes three chapters, the seventh, eighth and ninth, to an engaged discussion on what enables us 'to know', what kind of knowing effects knowing has on the knower's consciousness, and how that 'affective knowing' dissolves all dualities leading to a unity between the known and the knower, thus making any 'affective knowing' entirely redundant. "*jnani nityayukta eka bhakti-vishishyate*" – "The man of Knowledge, endowed with constant steadfastness and one pointed devotion excels." (Gita: 7.16) The later part of this verse postulates that the consciousness of the 'trying-to-know' knower and that of the 'all-knowing-knower' merge together. Knowledge, *jnana*, therefore, is the dissolution of dualities and attainment of unity.

The *Kena Upanishad* comments on the need for the dissolution of the consciousness 'trying-to-know': "*kenesitam patati presitam manah kena pranah prathamah pratiti yuktah ...*" – "By who willed and directed does the mind light on its objects? By who commanded does life the first, move?" (Kena: 1.1) In answer to this question, it proposes, "That which is not thought by the mind but by which, they say, the mind is thought ... That which is not seen by the eye but by which the eyes are seen ... That which is not heard by the ear but by which the ears are heard ... that which is not breathed by life, but by which life breathes; that verily, know thou, is *Brahman* ..." (Radhakrishnan 1953: 582–583). Therefore, knowing the *Brahman* is made the ultimate purpose of knowing of any kind, and knowing anything outside of *Brahman* is seen as a false knowing or non-knowing. And in the *Brahman*, there is no individual 'I' but only the pure Cosmic Self, and knowledge can only be subjective and never objective. The *Kena Upanishad* further asserts the perspective by posing a paradox: "To whomever it is not known, to him it is known; to whomsoever it is known, he does not know." According to S. Radhakrishnan this sentence implies: "*Brahman* cannot be comprehended as an object of knowledge. He can be realized as the subject of all knowledge." (ibid.: 585) And this is precisely where the Buddha decided to take up an argument with the philosophy of the *Upanishads*.

When he was the young prince Gautama, the Buddha had felt deeply moved by old-age, disease, death and poverty. He left his palace in search of a way of getting beyond these afflictions. He attended sermons in the schools preaching the Upnishidic philosophy, but he remained unsatisfied with the idea of salvation for oneself alone. He continued to wander, sad at heart that he had not found the way as yet. Being struck by a limitless remorse, he decided to fast and meditate on the human condition.

The Enlightenment realised by him formed Buddha's 'theory of knowledge'. His state is described in the Buddhist texts as *vajralike Samadhi* – indestructible concentration – involving a movement from *prajna* (intense intellect), through *karuna* (utmost compassion) to *jnana* (the highest wisdom). The term *jnana* cannot be equated with 'knowledge'. For the Buddha, treading the path from *prajna* to *jnana* is knowledge, yet both *prajna* and *jnana* by themselves being quite distinct from it. While Buddha did not accept the totality of the Upnishidic *Brahman* denying the human agency, he did nonetheless accept the idea that knowledge is a process rather than an end product. Nearly a millennium and a half after Buddha, another remarkable thinker, Abhinavagupta, postulated that "the knowledge of Truth is just another name for the knowledge of the Self" (Devy 2002: 66). For him, all experience and all 'dramatic sentiments' – *rasa* – were justified in their ability to evoke the experience of that which is 'permanent nature', the '*sthayibhava*' of '*moksha*'. Knowledge for him was, thus, 'realising' and not a (or the) 'realisation'.

3

Given the emphasis on the process of 'knowing' as the primary justification for the search, whether for Truth or for Self, it was but natural that the pedagogies for inter-generational transmission of wisdom – what we call 'education' – and the typologies of what was known or worth knowing – what we call 'disciplines' – were oriented towards quickening the process of knowing rather than consolidating the object called knowledge. Formulation of taxonomies, classification of accumulated knowledge and descriptions of disciplines remain critically dependent on a civilization's understanding of memory. It would, of course, be an injustice to the genius of the ancient Indian scholarship if we overlook the scholars' ability to formulate elaborate schemata for every field of knowledge known to them. For instance, the aesthetic experience in drama was classified by Bharata into eight types, the *rasas*, together with the details of the constant emotions, transitory emotions and the related actions on stage. In Dhananjaya's *Natyadarsa*, composed several centuries later, there is a further sub-classification of the types of plots, types of heroes, types of actions and so on. In Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*, we get to see elaborate taxonomies of emotive states, and he expounds in detail the sub-classes of 'poetic texture' produced differently by compounds, medium sized-compounds and long compounds. Similarly, the ancient Tamil theoretical text *Tolkapiyyum*, of the same period as the *Natyashastra*, has an amazing range of microscopic sub-classifications of every aspect of linguistic expression. For instance, it distributes diction into four types as follows:

> Words used in poetry are *Iyarcol*, *Thirisol*, *Thisaiccol* and *Vadasol*. Of them, *Iyarcol* words are those which are used in conformity with the usage of Tamil and without change in their meanings. The *Thirisol* words are of two kinds which are synonyms and homonyms. *Thisaiccol* or the

dialectical words are those which are spoken with their meanings unchanged in the twelve divisions of Tamil land where correct Tamil is in use. The words of Northern languages, *Vadasol*, become fit to be used in Tamil when they adopt the Tamil phonetics discarding their northern ones. (Devy 2002: 16)

One could not have asked for a more elaborate taxonomy of dialects and their literary use. This kind of minute classification marks all fields of knowledge in the ancient and medieval India including medicine, physiology, botany, chemistry, metallurgy, linguistics, mathematics, astronomy, drama, dance and music. The fields of knowledge went through a number of modifications during the medieval times, particularly after the main languages of knowledge transactions – Tamil, Pali, Sanskrit – were getting replaced by the modern Indian languages such as the modern Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Bangla, Oriya, Assamiya, Punjabi, Kashimiri etc. New categories were added to the previously existing taxonomies and some of the earlier categories were dropped. This transition is most evident from the eleventh to thirteenth century. Thus, Abhinavagupta added the *shant-rasa* as an aesthetic experience to the gamut proposed by Bharata a millennium before him; Mammata added more sub-types to Dhananjaya's classification of poetic arts; the saint poets of the 'Bhakti' period – poets like Kabir, Mira, Tukaram – added further concepts to the previously existing range of poetological, aesthetic and metaphysical concepts; musicians added more *ragas, gatis* – musical structures and patterns; the cartographers added new ways of doing cartography; arithmetic accepted a range of new weights, measures and units of counting.

This process of renewing and expanding the established disciplines was significantly quickened particularly after paper came into use as a means for recording computations, archives, philosophical arguments and written treatises. This is exactly how knowledge deepens in a given civilization and disciplines of knowledge evolve. It should be mentioned, however, that the schools of thought taken into account in the foregoing discussion have all been based on certain iconic texts available to us. It is these comparatively few iconic texts that form the basis of the history of Indian philosophy, literature and culture. This history has remained seriously lop-sided as it does not take into account the knowledge traditions of the communities that were left out of the spectrum of formal education and knowledge production. Here, the term 'formal education' is not being used to mean 'institutional education'. It is also not being used in order to draw a distinction between the oral traditions and the written traditions of knowledge. In India, almost all of the important 'texts' have come down to us, primarily through the oral recitations, till printing became a commonly used mode of reproducing texts. Hence, in the pre-modern Indian context, the term 'formal' should be understood as having a significantly different connotation. It points to the distinction between 'oral, but sanctified or canonised' and 'oral, but non-canonised'.

The non-canonised knowledge traditions belonged to the larger sections of the 'knowledge producers', mainly the indigenous communities – the Adivasis – and the

communities that were disparaged as 'untouchables' – the 'shudras'. These communities, as they uneasily co-existed with the non-shudras, continued to develop their own technique of dealing with the natural forces and the natural resources. They developed their own stories of origin of the world and their independent cosmologies, leading to their own interpretation of the universe and concepts like 'time' and 'space'. Though the Vedas – initially orally transmitted sacred texts spanning from around 1700–500 BCE – had in them 72 metrical forms of verse, the non-canonised communities developed their own meters. Though Bharata some time between 500 BCE and 500 CE had organised the dramatical performance through his *Natyashastra*, the non-canonized continued to develop their entirely different forms of theatre. Though the Ayurvada had evolved a certain kind of understanding of the human body, the non-canonized evolved their own, and strikingly different, understanding of the human anatomy. All of such 'knowledge' was brought down through generations of the non-canonised through apprenticeship and oral transmission. But in these communities, the attitude to the distinction between knowledge and labour was remarkably different from the one that prevailed among the holders of the canonised knowledge. As a result, a single and comprehensive formulation of an Indian body of 'universal knowledge' remained unattainable in the pre-modern India.

It is possible to argue that though the sanctified memory and the non-sanctified memory continued to exist and grow in largely unrelated canons, the creation of any 'universal knowledge' was not the primary objective of the pursuit of knowledge in India. This counter-argument, entirely valid as it is, would point to the centrality given to 'intuition' in acquiring knowledge. The knowledge traditions, in all canons whether tribal, Agrarian, Shamanic, Buddhist, Nyaya, Jaina, Sankhya or Upnishidic, all maintained that the fountain-head of knowledge is the individual consciousness. It springs from within, for it is *apriori* to the human consciousness, already in the being. The *Bhagwat-gita* states unambiguously that 'knowledge is to be seen getting realised, which the confused ones never do. It is only those who approach it with their gnana-chakshu can see it.' (Adhyaya: 15, verse 10: *Utkramantam sthitam vapi bhunjanam va gunanvitam. Vimudha-nanu pashyanti, pashyati gnanachakshu-sah.*) It does not 'dawn upon' but 'emerges or springs up' as the *sphota* theory of meaning most eloquently proposes. Hence, various knowledge traditions spoke of the '*gnan-chakshu*' (the knowledge-eye which opens through concentration). In this process, 'intuition', not 'memory' acquires primacy. There *was* one exception though to India's adherence to intuition as the non-negotiable foundation of knowledge. It emerged from the Lokayata school of the materialists initiated by Charvaka (around 600 BCE). Describing the intellectual ethos of India during the closing centuries of the millennium before Christ, Wendy Doniger states:

> A number of groups engaged in friendly intellectual combat at this time. Those were probably early adherents of what were to become the six major philosophical schools of Hinduism: Critical Inquiry (*Mimansa*), Logic (*Nyaya*), Particularism (*Vesisika*), Numbers (*Sankhya*), Yoga and

> Vedanta. *Ajivikas* (contemporaries of Jainas and Buddhists) rejected free will, an essential component of the doctrine of *Karma*. *Lokayatas* ("This worldly" people also called Materialists and Charvakas, followers of a founder named Charvaka) not only rejected the doctrine of reincarnation [...] but believed that physical sense data were the only source of knowledge [...]. (Doniger 2009: 185)

However, in the subsequent centuries the followers of the Lokayatas were driven out of the social fold and the intellectual debates. However, while the memory based universal knowledge, an objective stock of which most civilizations seek to build, has correspondingly objective ways of validation, validation of intuition is not possible through objective criteria. Therefore, the measure of authenticity, the mark of validation and the ways of recognising 'new theory' in Indian traditions of knowledge depended primarily on approval by the peers or superiors in the intuition-networks. And, almost invariably, the knower in India vouched fulfilment by claiming that what he knew as 'new knowledge' had all been there in tradition, known already by his forerunners. With this background, India's exposure to the western forms of knowledge during the colonial era and the confrontation with their distinct traditions of knowledge within the framework of the unequal power relationship brought the 'validity' of Indian knowledge canons close to a crisis of existence. Acknowledging this, Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* records that while the British rulers had been far less civilised in the past as compared to the pre-colonial Indians, during the two centuries of the colonial era a new phenomenon had been arising in Europe and energised the British. It was the phenomenon called 'modernity':

> There was more literacy in India than in England or the rest of the Europe, though education was strictly traditional. Probably, there were more civic amenities also. The general condition of the masses in Europe was very backward and deplorable and compared unfavourably with the conditions prevailing in India. But there was this vital difference: new forces and living currents were working invisibly in Western Europe, bringing change in their train; in India, conditions were far more static. (Nehru 1946: 311)

Once begun towards the close of the eighteenth century, the 'vital difference' continues to remain unbridged to our time.

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Throughout human history, man has attempted to extract methods of representing the natural phenomena by using various ingenious methods of encrypting the formal features of the phenomena. These attempts, from the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs to Greek trigonometry and the medieval European magical-code languages, had essentially aimed at storing human experiences in ways that would make them 'portable', giving them life beyond their natural life. The desire to represent, store, transact and

to pass on to the succeeding generations what humans 'know' culminated in the seventeenth-century German thinker Leibniz's conceptualisation of a 'pure language', a language of signs that do not have any meaning at all by themselves but have the ability to represent constant and entirely non-subjective meanings (as in mathematical symbols). This was his 'logical calculi' (cf. Rossi 2006: 185). Leibniz's attempt was preceded by a number of similar attempts made towards exploring methods of representing ideas and arriving at abstractions of abstractions. During the historical phase of transition from the use of Latin to that of the modern European languages for intellectual and imaginative expression, more particularly the sixteeeth and seventeenth centuries, the obsessive attraction for inventing a symbolic method for 'stating knowledge' made it possible for European scholars to arrive at systematising and representing ideas in terms of what came to be accepted as 'universal science'. Thus, in 1582 Giordano Bruno came up with the idea, as summarised in Paolo Rossi's fascinating classic *Logic and the Art of Memory* (2006), that combining 'associations of ideas' in manageable symbolic strings would help holding a vast amount of knowledge in a relatively small band of human memory.

In Bruno's model, through the artificial retention of the 'chains' (or relations between the 'shadows') in the mind, one can reconstruct, by means of a gradual process of purification, the connections which exist between the ideas themselves. The contemplation of the unity which is hidden in the confused plurality of appearances leads to a rational understanding of ideal relations (cf. Rossi 2006: 84–85). A century later, in 1675, Leibniz proposed his celebrated aphorism '*existere nihil aliud esse quam harmonicum esse*' – 'to exist is nothing other than to be harmonious.' (cf. ibid.: 192). In that span of a century and a half from Bruno to Leibniz, Europe had discovered the ability of the human mind to reduce diverse perceptions to a 'harmonised understanding', capable of being stated in abstract terms. This ability is what is described in philosophical terms as 'rationality.' If René Descartes (1595–1650) gave to Europe the philosophical basis for its rationality, often highlighted through his claim '*je pense, donc je suis*' ('I am, because I think'), Bruno, Leibniz and their contemporaries gave Europe the 'method' of stabilising knowledge on the bedrock of rationality. These historical factors would not be of any direct relevance to an analysis of the trajectory of 'knowledge' in India, or any other civilisation, had it not been for the fact that they clearly point to the use of memory for encrypting and classifying knowledge. The history of 'sorting out and storing ideas' in Europe is also of interest to us as, in the process, memory gets completely transmuted from being just a commonly shared heritage of human societies to a higher order platform for commanding and canonising the cerebral acts of humans, resulting in the idea of a universal knowledge, or the real business of universities.

In Indian traditions of learning, memory had been a central interest from the earliest times. In fact, what was worth learning was described with the term '*smriti*' ('remembering' as well as 'the remembered'). The *Bhagwad-gita* contains the rather categorical pronouncement that weakening of '*smriti*' leads to destruction of the intel-

lect, *smriti-branshat buddhi-nash*. In ancient Indian literature and theoretical compositions, special care was taken to aid and facilitate easy remembering of the text by introducing various accessible mnemonic tools, quite akin to the Ciceronean use of memory. The larger part of the ancient Indian literature of diverse philosophical schools was preserved through memorisation with a very high standard of accuracy. There is no other civilisation in the world that insisted on developing memory as the most central tool of learning with such obsessive interest as was done in India for millennia. Probably, the difference between the turn that the seventeenth-century use of memory took in Europe and the use of memory in the history of ideas in India was that the idea of a 'science of knowledge, or a universal knowledge' did not find favour with those who held knowledge.

The idea of knowledge as 'knowing', bringing intellect closer to intuition, together with the sophisticated use of memory for a flawless reproduction of the texts from the past, had resulted in 'apprenticeship' becoming, as stated earlier, the most favoured mode of receiving and giving education in India. It was favoured not only for those disciplines such as medicine, chemistry, sculpture, architecture, metallurgy, dance, music and crafts, in which skills constitute the major part of understanding, but also for the disciplines in which the ability for abstraction and raising new questions form their core, disciplines such as philosophy, poetry, mathematics, and astronomy. In combination with the social segregation that set in the Indian society more than two thousand years ago, the internship mode of cultivating knowledge became a formidable hindrance in producing any genuiely 'universal science'. While a high-accuracy memorisation continued to be the tool for storing developments in ideas, the access to such memorisation was restricted by the social status of a person. The result was that in the pre-colonial times two broad streams of memory-based knowledge spectrums continued to co-exist without much of a possibility for mutual exchange and cross-fertilisation: one, the spectrum of the memory traditions of those who had access to abstract symbols, including writing; and two, the spectrum of the memory traditions of those who were prevented from attempting symbolic abstractions.

In India's literary past, most of the linguistic creativity has been in the oral tradition. Though people knew how to write, writing was not used as means of educating the next generation in remembering these compositions. This is not to deny that we had something written even in Harappan times (2200–1300 BCE), and a tremendous era of literary productivity in ancient Tamil (ca. 300 BCE) and post-Vedic Sanskrit (after 500 BCE); but by and large, knowledge, literature and memory were handed down not through writing but through speech and oral media. What developed in India as oral tradition was not just 'writing' on walls, textile surfaces and in figurative ritual designs, but also compositions of texts, documents or what one describes as 'manuscripts'. They follow the logic of speech rather than the logic of orthography. The aim here is not in any way to establish writing as redundant but only to indicate that considering what is non-written as non-manuscript would be inadequate in accounting for India's 'knowledge' traditions.

Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the printing technology started giving a new life to Indian languages, the status of knowledge preserved and developed in the non-printed and non-written languages diminished altogether. As a result, the split between the social sections who had an easy access to letters and those who were denied that ease of access was aggravated at that precious moment of India's transition from medieval times to modernity. This is not to say that all of the oral traditions of memory and knowledge in the non-printed languages ceased to exist at once. But, while they continued to exist within their limited confines, the possibility of India devising a grand scheme of classifying all that was known in Indian traditions with the help of a single and unified symbolic grid tied firmly to 'all memory' – as it had happened a couple of centuries ago in Europe – was no longer a viable possibility in India.

Under the impact of the colonial understanding of 'knowledge', Indians started looking at literature in terms of a binary division of 'literature' (which is available in written form) and 'folk-literature' (which is deprived of the opportunity of being written). While Indians had been all along building houses, architecture now got divided in terms of 'vernacular' and 'architecture'. Languages came to be listed differently as 'languages' and 'dialect'. It is with the wound of a deeply divided 'memory field' that India has been trying to internalise the idea of a 'universal knowledge' over the last two centuries. The modernising India of the nineteenth century had to launch upon the project of creating a society operating within a shared band of abstract signs welded to memory, before it would start thinking of generating new fields of knowledge that qualified to be 'universal' science or discipline.

The historical juncture at which India started internalising a pervasive cultural amnesia was also the moment in the European history of ideas when memory started to be seen as secondary or inferior to imagination.[3] First Immanuel Kant in Germany and then Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England postulated memory as the 'agency which plays with mere tokens of fancy', while imagination, in this view, was the 'regenerative' power of the mind (Coleridge 1817). In the words of an able commentator on this Romantic epistemology, M. H. Abrams (1954), memory performed the function of 'a mirror', imagination that of 'a lamp'. Prior to this, the seventeenth-century philosopher Hobbes had still spoken of imagination as a demonic force, born of melancholia, inducing in the mind 'fancy' of 'ghosts, goblins, witches, where there exist none' (Hobbes 1651: chapter VII). He had, in turn, derived the idea of imagination as a dangerous mental process from the ancient Greeks, particularly Plato. But the German and British Romantic poets of the nineteenth century started questioning the idea, using Plato again and Plotinus. In a sharp contrast to the disapproval of imagination that their predecessors had expressed, they proposed not imagination but memory as the spiritual-inferior, a game of empty tokens. They proposed imagination as an order of reality higher than the mundane and, therefore, with a superior truth value. John

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3 For a more detailed explication of the following reflections cf. Devy 2017: esp. 76–92.

Keats stated unequivocally that "whatever the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not".

Nearly half a century later, memory returned very powerfully as the centre-piece in the Freudian narrative of the human mind, the psyche. It was so central to Sigmund Freud's analysis of mental illnesses that had memory not been available to him as the base of his model, he would not have been able to construct the entire edifice of his Psychoanalysis. The history of ideas often witnesses the emergence of two completely antagonistic and competing thoughts or impulses, both of which keep evolving simultaneously. However, this need not be seen as an instance of the Hegelian dialectics. During the nineteenth century, Hegel's theory of history, Marx's theory of material dialectics and Freud's Psychoanalysis made memory, in the structured and narrated form of history, their main ploy. This predominantly temporal mode of memory was superseded in history by the rise of the camera technology leading, only half a century later, to the rise of cinema as the twentieth-century's most powerful collective of the more spatially organised image, fantasy and dream. By the end of the century, the image making devices and the image-processing technology had brought to the world an alternative to a narratavised memory that appears to have started transforming the human existence most fundamentally. The British Romantic poet William Wordsworth had made the quest for the lost 'spots of time' his poetic mission. In his view the 'spot' could bring time and space in a pure union. The recent discovery of 'digit' as the vehicle of knowledge is, in an ironic way, the technological culmination of that quest. It is the use of the digit, now being conveyed over unimaginably long distances through electro-magnetic waves. The electronic digit has started impacting the world as nothing else in the human past ever has. In a relatively very short span of time, the world as humans have known it for the last half a million human years – what Immanuel Kant described as the 'phenomenal world' – is close to an irrevocable convergence with the digital world. The earliest symptom of the new convergence between the physical and the digital is the near complete alienation of memory.

At present, most members of the human species have started depending on external memory-chips for performing the memory functions, which during all of the preceding generations they had been performing by themselves. During the earliest phases of the long process of evolution of the human species, memory had been purely the individual's prerogative. Later, the collective memory placed in the social space assumed the form of schools.[4] During the European Enlightenment, a new order of memory in this collective space appeared, institutionalised as university, museum and library, which in turn offered an 'objective' basis for disciplines of 'universal knowledge'. In the present time, with the near complete alienation of memory from humans, that basis of 'objective knowledge' is getting rapidly eroded and in its place, images are acquiring an increasing power in the processes of knowledge production. I use the term 'post-memory knowledge' for describing this new field that the human

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4 For a complete account of the evolution of memory cf. Rossi 2006.

mind is engrossed in shaping. The post-memory knowledge is being 'written' through digital signs that can take meaning beyond the grammatical structures constrained by tenses (as the memory-based knowledge was).

Given that the human brain is constantly evolving and, in the process, has been acquiring untold powers to comprehend very complex realities, it is but to be expected that it forces the human language(s) and thought to go beyond the established logic of tense and distance, beyond memory and imagination, beyond time and space, so that a far more complex multi-frame reality can be comprehended and expressed by humans through whatever means they will develop in the future. Michael C. Corballis, in a fascinating study of the recursive brains of humans, offers an unsettling argument, claiming that while brain functions and the structure of the human mind are recursive, the structure of language is not:

> The unique properties of grammar may have originated in the uniqueness of human mental travel ... But the structure of language itself is not a matter of mental travel ... Thus although language may have evolved, initially at least, for the communication of episodic information, it is itself a robust system embedded in the more secure vaults of semantic and implicit memory. It has taken over large areas of our memory systems, and indeed our brain. (Cornballis 2011: 126)

It is not unlikely then, as Cornballis' study indicates, that when the pact between memory and the brain, or the one between language and the brain, is snapped, the brain shall figure out newer ways of 'thinking'. Perhaps, spatially organised imaging may occupy the areas of the brain functions that narrativising memory has occupied through a larger part of the human evolution. I opened this essay showing how difficult it is to locate concepts and intellectual movements in two diverse traditions – Indian and Western – as a starting point for any comparative assessment of how the ideas of knowledge developed in the two traditions. My concluding discussion of the evolutionary changes in man's cognitive capabilities points to the emergence of an opening for such a comparison. I am, thus, enthusiastic about the possibility of a comparative study; but my argument should hopefully bring home the point that that is a future possibility.

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