

ACADEMIC DEPENDENCY IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: ALTERNATIVE SOCIOLOGY DISCOURSES RELEVANT TO SOUTH ASIA UNDER POST COLONIAL CONDITIONS.

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Introduction

Sociology as a discipline was introduced to the South Asian higher education sector during the British colonial period. Since then, the teaching of sociology has gone through significant transformation as a result of various contextual, systemic and institutional factors. This transformation had many dimensions as well as impacts on the quality and standards of teaching and research in sociology and anthropology.

Notwithstanding this transformation, ‘academic dependency’ on Western forms of theory, methodology and knowledge produced as sociology elsewhere continued - some say, in a distorted manner. It is argued by some sociologists that what is taught is an ossified form of historical sociology rather than one relevant and suitable for contemporary South Asian societies. Sociology teaching also neglects local intellectual, philosophical and cultural traditions. Sociologists writing from the ‘global south perspective’ are proposing alternative forms of knowledge construction in social sciences by using local intellectual traditions, concepts, theories and methodologies in the form of indigenous sociology or pluralist sociology.

The objective of this research is to contribute to the development of a ‘critique of Western hegemony’ and ‘academic dependency’ perpetuated in the social sciences in South Asian universities on one hand and to start a dialogue on alternative knowledge construction relevant to the historical, cultural, and epistemic contexts in the countries of South Asia informed by local intellectual and philosophical traditions, on the other. This is critical in the face of globalisation processes where knowledge defined by the social science powers of the Global North continue to expand to regions like South Asia at an accelerated phase due to technological advancements and open borders.

Methodology

The paper is the result of library research and a review of relevant literature, conducted over the last two years on the subject and intellectual discussions in the *Comparative and International Education Research Network* (CIERN), School of Education, University of New England, Australia. During this period, we have been critically reviewing literature pertaining to Southern Theory and alternative knowledge construction from the perspective of global South e.g. Connell (2007). In the paper, I will specifically articulate the findings from my research pertaining to Social Sciences in South Asia including Sri Lanka with a focus on sociology (including social anthropology). This paper examines the nature of 'Western hegemony' and 'academic dependency' visible in social sciences, in particular sociology and anthropology, in South Asia and what factors impact it and also what alternative knowledge construction is possible and suitable for South Asia in the Social Sciences under Postcolonial conditions.

Results and Discussion

The results reveal that there are epistemic, institutional and contextual factors contributing to the perpetuation of Western hegemony and academic dependence in social sciences in South Asian universities. Among these factors are colonisation, change of the medium of instruction from English to local languages, brain drain, lack of trained staff, expansion to rural and regional areas and politicisation, de-linking with global sociology, text books in local languages, and consultancy work for NGOs. The academic dependency on Western social science knowledge (theory, concepts, paradigms, methods, curricula and textbooks) has been described by the terms 'captive mind' (Alatas, 2006). Such dependency has led to the creation of 'a lack of fit' between received Western knowledge and the needs of countries concerned. Imitative practices continue in teaching, research and publications while social scientists do not make an effort to identify and construct concepts, theories and methods from their own indigenous intellectual, cultural and philosophical traditions though it is possible. As Alatas (2006) states, while it is difficult for social scientists to change the structural conditions leading to such academic dependency, they are certainly able to change the intellectual orientation in their teaching, research and publications.

The paper addresses alternative sociology discourses such as indigenous sociology and pluralistic sociology and their nature in the latter part.

Conclusion

If sociology is perceived as a science or a pseudo science that is designed to discover ‘objective’ truths or realities by using a rigorous methodology in the empirical tradition, there is very little deviation possible whether the research is conducted in South Asia, in Europe or America. Sociologists in South Asia and elsewhere may need to think beyond this positivist orientation to research by embracing interpretivist or other approaches or even re-discovering alternative approaches from their own historical, philosophical, religious, and literary traditions for the study of society, culture, human behaviour, and social problems.

Going beyond the ‘reproductive mode’ in teaching sociology requires critical, creative and ‘out of the box’ thinking and reflection by sociologists in the region by posing difficult questions and looking for answers. Sociologists in South Asia need to get involved with other social scientists and humanities scholars who are versed in the local traditions of scholarship – though not called sociology scholarship per se – and enter into collaborative work in terms of research and publications. They need to look at age-old literary practices with a fresh set of eyes and re-discover the value of the wisdom contained for contemporary uses and futuristic enterprises. They need to move beyond the standard imitative talk of the sociology discipline toward an unknown, undiscovered (by the sociologists) social, religious, political, and economic thought that exists in the sub-layers of society.

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