



Guru-Shishya Tradition: A Methodological Intervention

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Abstract

This paper attempts to establish a balance between content and methodology. Guru-shishya tradition existed as a form of pedagogy in social *weltanschauung* over the period of time. It existed in all South Asian cultures as well as other parts of the world as a principle and/or other forms. Paper endeavors to look at Hierarchy as the modality to write history in knowledge and cultural way. Expansion of tradition from religious arena to social life as well as educational sphere. It explores *ceteris paribus* of multiple hierarchies, variations in religion; knowledge and pedagogy. The attempt here is to situate the said tradition spatially and temporally at Bundelkhand region between 1840s to 1980s—emphasizing oral and local histories. It explores the historical experiences of multiple hierarchies in the system(s) of pedagogy. One has tried to situate the said tradition (taking as a dynamic rather static entity) in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial societies to explicate the questions of differences, discrimination, and exclusion.

Keywords: Guru-shishya tradition, Bundelkhand, Oral History, Local History.

Introduction

Historically, many thinkers trace characteristics of the modes of thought (read: knowledge) and its transmission in society in many ways. Some have looked at this through change and continuity thesis as contrasting and others have seen it as a continuum in the categories of periodization. Recent scholarship focuses on the latter rather than as a dichotomy. Jack Goody speaks about the aforementioned thesis in traditional and modern society in terms of literacy. Goody has formulated how the logic of writing works in different areas of life. Religious conversion in a strict sense has taken place because of the formalization of the written word of god in sacred books. In this context, there were many junctures in “Indian” History when literacy was restricted to Brahmins. ^[1] In concert with Goody, Parry has portrayed a *bi-focalled* worldview of orality and literacy where he traces the very idea of how the *shasatrik* knowledge becomes paramount with the coming of literacy. Moreover, modes of thinking have been rigidified (read: fixed) with the development of the notion of ‘textual’ in some sense—at least in principle—beyond debate. ^[2] The proposition enclosed by the *Kalyan*; a Hindi printed monthly (magazine) and other religious text in our area of study. At the same time, Parry argues that the oral tradition(s) have a tendency towards critical evaluation over the period of time, since said tradition has the characteristics of repetition, with the advent of writing the very tendencies of invention and transformation have been decreased in great length.

Evidently, the aforementioned hypothesis is evident with the language itself (here, *Sanskrit*); which literally means

‘cultured’ or/and ‘refined’, as well as the resembling to *deva-vani* in the Bramanical tradition. In this regard, the language *Sanskrit* works as a carrier for *eternally valid* knowledge. Paradoxically, Parry also gets different inferences based on oral narratives. Such as the phenomenology of *kathas* is very much reliant on the oral verbalization and at the same time, it got legitimacy with the written verbalization—*shastras*. However, the said legitimacy is not always apparent but both are very much dependent on the ‘human authority—a sage or a guru’ ^[3]. However, over the orality par say, there are several instances in history where a significant portion of the population, particularly women and shudras, were prohibited from ever listening to the sacred words. ^[4]

In the backdrop of *kathas*, Philip has been argued the guru-shishya relationship is a central to the art of *katha*. ^[5] Expounded text through the Expounder (*kathvacak*) operates towards the “orality of language” and narrative has been depended utterly real time imagination of *kathvacak*, in the direction for the *psychological makeup* of audience (read: patron). Particular philosophies which is responsible for the hierarchical patterning of society has been deeply rooted in the psyche of so called illiterate audience. Manifestly, through the oral verbalisation of *mans* (namely; *satsang*) at pilgrim town *chitrakut*. ^[6]

This interdependence (text/performance) *mise-en-scene* of *Manas* in north Indian culture (specifically *Chitrakut*); Philip has called ‘a blueprint rather than an artifact’ ^[7]. In a similar vein one got instance from Gita ‘Discarding the injunctions of the scriptures, he who acts in an arbitrary way according to his own sweet will, such a person neither attains perfection,

nor the supreme goal, nor even happiness' [8]. Distinctively, urge towards the *shastras*, at the same time; it is mandatory to 'guru' like figure adhere to the scriptures and the religious proceedings took place in right way—in the presence of guru. Indeed, the transmission of knowledge and cultural production of said tradition happened through both ways—orally and literary.

Apart from the said categories, we also get the instances of transmission of knowledge with memorization in the work of Dale F. Eickelman where he infers the existing 'traditional' religious education in Morocco and puts forth the argument that excessiveness of memorization is a *prima facie* to obtain Islamic education in the said country-subject. Moreover, the concept of sound; power of words; and proper recitation is embedded in the Quranic traditional education and appropriation should take place with the category of 'man of learning' backdrop of 'culturally valued knowledge.' [9] Memorization is very much part of the guru-shishya tradition, transmission took place since childhood i.e. rhetorical of mantras in our subject-matter.

Furthermore, Walter J. Ong. Focuses on the terrain of orality and the orality-literacy shift. In context to the indispensability of the orality—discourse as a natural kind, he has inferred various cultures across the world (Homeric poetry, ancient oral Greek culture). He also pointed out how the process of verbatim memorization has been very much part of the guru-shishya tradition since Vedic times. Onwards, he argues that sometimes literacy demanded some kind of figure like a 'guru' who articulates things between reader and text. However, the different *generalized* categorizations ought to be understood with the *particularity* of Bundelkhand where gurus, according to Jacob Copeman, could hail from any caste and religion.

Manifestation of the hierarchy is very much apparent in a pedagogical perspective. Despite this overtly seeming 'law', their characteristics and forms have changed worldwide over the period of time. Evidently, the category (rather than group) of traditional 'man of learning' and their conception of world postulates the notion of inequality as a natural aspect in the social order, specifically in Moroccan society. [10] The same notion is very much vested in traditions of "gentlemanly" (sic.) in Victorian England and Chinese culture; empirically portrayed by moral virtues for the latter and public spirit for the former. In a similar vein, the 'guru' is the epitome of all religiously legitimized *ascriptive* differences in South Asian culture. The said difference(s) is vested in the problematic to define human nature and further imperative towards the belief system as well as the 'guru'. It is also seen in the Brahmanical tradition(s), namely, as Jonathan Parry terms it—technology of intellect (*language*).

It is crucial to grasp that what is conveyed through the *guru-shishya paramapara* (succession), is not predominantly intellectual knowledge but rather the transfer of authority. [11] Moreover, aforementioned authority as well as the social order to be maintained through the production of certain kind of (knowledge (?); refashioned accordingly). The term *arajakta* has literal mean 'absence of a king or ruler' but metaphorically it indicates the 'state of chaos' within the context of language change and continuity. language (in vast sense; Print) has been positioned towards the fixation of knowledge in mentioned time and space.

Now we moved towards the different sets of nuanced understandings of the European (colonial?) discourse on indigenous knowledge. The understanding of the said knowledge is very much tuned with the idea of colonial-

indigenous language encounter(s). Language is not only a medium of communication, it represents a set of cultures, a particular worldview in which said encounter takes place. Sean P. Harvey has shown how the language works as a means to power over indigenous populations in aforementioned encounters. As Anthony Pagden has argued 'the observer not only has to decide what he is seeing, but he also has to find someplace for it in his own world' [12]. The person imposed his own world view on another culture, it works in such a way i.e. vocabulary, classification. (in both ways between colonial and indigenous encounter). This idea is very much in function when one talks about the European discourse on Indian knowledge given the problems of recognition. One has to remember, that the colonial power did not recognize the Indian world view, they define them in the understanding of their own world. (connect to English).

The potency of language is evident in discussions; argument progress in a manner that... 'The true civil community was made possible through the persuasive power of language.' [13] The idea of language in its very construction is a product of culture and social circumstances. There were many historical occurrences in which language operates in a way to establish some people are barbarian and other are civilised. Comparatively, with the same framework, one can easily observe how indigenous people in North America have molded new ideas to match their own frames of reference. [14] Historiographically, there are various standpoints to look at the colonial discourse on Indian knowledge. Bernard Cohn has emphasized the very idea of colonial construction of Indian knowledge as well as social relations, on the other hand, Phillip Wagoner has shown that colonial knowledge was an intermediary (indigenous) colonized project. However, the approach ought to be amidst the language encounter, and how it has produced a new form of knowledge. Language itself produced a particular kind of narrative (history?), which is evident in the Ranajit Guha's method for reading the archive 'against the grain' as well as in the work of Laura Ann. Stoler (reading along the grain) – functionality of language as a tool for both cultural change as well as a site for inclusion and exclusion. [15]

Moving further to the change and continuity problematic of the tradition and pedagogy from primordial to colonial, the existing hierarchies and feudal tendencies have been strengthened with the coming of European domination since it were the British who have *developed* and *invented* Hindu sensitivities and fostered them. [16] They invent such categories from their own world and impose them on Indians. In the pedagogical arena, British has been designed University curriculum in way which produced predominantly 'reformer' in colonial India on the one hand and 'political leader' in Britain on the other at similar historical juncture.

At the same time, the idea of orientalism took the form of Indo-European in South Asian cultures i.e. the concept of Aryan theory. Moreover, we need to situate the social relations and exclusion in pedagogy and knowledge production as brethren between colonized and local "upper caste" magnates. Furthermore, the introduction of English into the pedagogical arena by the British constitutes new frames of hierarchy. In this context, one has to understand the said phenomena not only in the backdrop of some kind of English imposition and its resistance by the Indian population but more nuanced historical experience. As Viswanathan has proposed it's a part of 'voluntary cultural assimilation' by the Europeans on the one hand, the reconstitution and rise of an indigenous elite i.e., urban middle class on the other. [17] At

the same time Osterhammel Jurgen has argued typically, the Europe's expanding languages didn't erase and replace existing worlds; rather, they were superimposed upon them.^[18]

Resistance of the Indian population has been seen with colonial domination along the Indian feudalism simultaneously. In fact, Hira Singh particularly argued about the sustainability of Indian feudalism in the backdrop of the princely state—one-third of British domination. The fact that this composition of hierarchy within the hierarchy and its conjunction with power has been continued in the post-colonial period. Since, it is evident that the dominant language of society—as dominant ideology—is always the language of its ruling class.^[19]

The traditional “man of learning” in Moroccan society has been very influential in the post-colonial period since the ‘culturally valued knowledge’. At the same time, we get some instances of sharp breaks too with the tradition and dependency of intermediaries in religious life as well. Additionally, in the post-colonial period, the national policy on education was not able to resolve/understand the very premise of social justice as well as a sensibility towards the “pedagogy of the oppressed”. Furthermore, the development of pedagogy has fallen short of emphasizing the human agency as a subject-matter of social intervention in the mentioned scholarships. One can incorporate Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration to intricate relationship between individual agency and social structure *en meme temps* freedom and bondage. As Anil Sadgopal pointed out “guru-shishya parampara” is going to absorb, reduce, or distort the talents and wealth of wisdom obtained by crores of “Eklavyas” in order to further the interests of the ruling classes and castes—a statement that required further research and questioning.^[20]

Conclusion

Indeed, as we have seen language inherently breeds hierarchies within societies. Since knowledge travels in the ‘baggage of languages’^[21] as well as the culturally embedded in nature. One should perceive the production of knowledge is an inclusive endeavor, not merely an end in itself, but crucial means towards the emancipation of the masses.

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