India’s struggles over what counts as knowledge

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In early 2017, the West Bengal government held an examination for 6,000 jobs in the Class IV category. This is the lowest category of permanent employment in government service, and reportedly pays ₹16,200 a month, by no means a princely sum. Roughly 2.5 million men and women appeared for the exam, many of them holders of graduate and postgraduate degrees. This is not an unusual occurrence. In 2015, 2.3 million people applied for around 400 Class IV jobs in Uttar Pradesh. Of these, 150,000 were university graduates. Across the country, young people in the thousands, desperate for stable employment as well as a life of respect and dignity, have taken to the streets to demand reservations in government jobs for their communities—Marathas in Maharashtra, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, Jats across north India, all traditionally powerful and well-to-do groups. Reservations for Patidars were a central issue in the recent electoral battle in Gujarat.

India’s GDP has grown at a rough average of 7 percent per year over the past two decades, social aspirations have risen with it. There have been significant improvements in education in many states. Not long ago, most adult workers had no formal schooling, and hence no hope of formal employment, whether in the public or the private sector. Now, their children increasingly have high-school certificates and often also college degrees, and with these the expectation of permanent jobs. But the number of decent, stable and well-paying jobs, whether private or public, have not increased in keeping with the numbers of new entrants to the labour-force, let alone to accommodate those leaving agriculture and other traditional occupations in search of better employment. This phenomenon has popularly been termed “jobless growth.” Surveys by the ministry of labour show that only 15 percent of Indian workers have regular, salaried jobs. The same surveys also show that 67 percent of Indian households report a monthly income of ₹10,000 or less, and only 2 to 3 percent of households earn more than ₹50,000 a month. These trends have given us a generation that feels cheated by the system.

But the problem is two-fold. While educated young Indians cannot find good jobs, employers cannot find good, educated workers. A recent “employability study” of 160,000 engineering graduates by a Delhi-based employment-solutions company, found that barely 7
percent were suitable for engineering jobs. Another, by the Associated Chambers of Commerce of India, also found that around 7 percent of the thousands of graduates emerging from the country's 5,400 business schools each year were "employable." Young people are realising the futility of attending many of the country's institutes of higher learning. There are now no takers for nearly half of all available seats at engineering colleges nationwide.

Yet the Indian economy still functions and provides livelihoods for millions of people. Jobless growth is in some ways a misnomer. It is not that Indian growth has not created jobs at all, it is that the jobs created have mostly been in what economists call the "informal economy," which takes in hundreds of millions of farmers, artisans and workers of all kinds—workers who have no job security, and often no regular income. Millions of skilled and productive, but formally uneducated, workers—who grow and cook our food, weave our cloth and stitch our clothes, make our furniture, construct our houses, and perform most services—are denied the better wages and legal protections considered worthy of formal, salaried work. In the twenty-first century, our skilled, uneducated workforce is being replaced by unskilled, educated workers. This is an unsustainable model.

We may lament the state of our education system, the incompetence of our policymakers, the insincerity of our politicians, and even blame globalisation for failing to create equal opportunities for all Indian citizens. There is plenty of blame to go around, but the question is, what is to be done? Fixing the current model is not a matter of just opening more vocational training programmes or designing the right foreign-direct-investment policy. It needs us to question what values govern our society, and what futures we imagine for India. The main problem is the popular discrimination between skilled and unskilled work—rooted in the accepted notions of who is valued as a worker with specialised knowledge, and what counts as knowledge in the first place. India's social divisions are at the heart of these issues, based on caste, class and colonial values. India is triply disadvantaged. As in many other societies, we suffer from the "bad versus bad" hierarchy, which ascribes higher status to purely mental work over work that requires physical labour. In India, that hierarchy is also encoded in caste, with mental labour assigned to dominant castes and physical labour assigned to oppressed ones. Finally, there is the colonial presumption, still largely in place, that fluency in English is a sign of intellectual superiority.

These divisions enforce social and knowledge hierarchies. Simply put, most elites do not consider the knowledge that most people possess in contemporary India to be legitimate or deserving of equal standing with formal knowledge. Social justice, and a way out of the current crisis, requires a roadmap for cognitive justice.

The Web of Freedom, a recent intellectual biography of the economist JC Kumarappa by the academics Venu Madhav Govind and Deepak Malghan, is an account of one man's lifelong battle to restore legitimacy and dignity to the knowledge systems of common people. Kumarappa played a key role in developing the "village movement," part of the Gandhian project of the 1930s, and was a key figure in debates surrounding economic policy in colonial and post-colonial India. The meticulously researched book offers an in-depth account of Kumarappa's evolution from a successful Bombay-based accountant to one of the foremost proponents of an economy organised around the skills of ordinary Indians.

Kumarappa was born in 1892, into an elite Tamil Christian family. He studied at Columbia University, where he was taught by the economist EA Seligman—who also taught SR Ambedkar—and later settled in Bombay as an accountant. Meeting Gandhi and encountering his theories of village economies transformed him. Kumarappa threw himself wholeheartedly into the Gandhian movement, and spent 20 years living in a small hut in Magnavadi, near Wardha, in what is now Maharashtra, from where he coordinated the activities of the All India Village Industries Association. Revising the rural economy was his life's work. He was the only Gandhian on the pre-Independence National Planning Committee, the forerunner of the National Planning Commission. After Independence, he served as the chair of the government's Agrarian Reform Committee.

Among Kumarappa's better-known works are Economy of Permanence and Why the Village Movement? Between the 1930s and the 1950s, he also wrote several articles on experiments in village industries, khadi production and the swadeshi economy. For him, as for Gandhi, swadeshi ideals did not mean replacing English factories with Indian ones, but rather, creating a distributed or decentralised system of production based in villages. Being a trained economist, Kumarappa also produced theoretical arguments in support of village industries and a local economy. He argued that these were crucial to restoring employment, autonomy and dignity to local citizens. According to Govind and Malghan, "while Gandhi laid out the broad contours of an argument for swadeshi, it was Kumarappa who out of prolonged engagement shaped it into a theory of decentralisation."

After Independence, the prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, advocated large-scale production and the centralisation of resources wherever possible, to be coordinated through the National Planning Commission. Kumarappa took the opposite stance. He advocated small-scale and decentralised production, and large-scale production only where these were not feasible. The Web of Freedom outlines his debates on the merits and demerits of large-scale and small-scale industry with Jayaprakash Narayan, who was at the time an ardent Marxist. The questions they raised—such as ones of appropriate scale of production, whether efficiency is the same as productivity, and the nature of progress—are still relevant. Perhaps most significantly, they force us to ask why certain techniques and forms of knowledge are seen as "progressive," and what would happen if we accorded importance to equity over productivity. Kumarappa's philosophical vision incorporated a range of influences—Christian theology, the nineteenth-century American economist Thorstein Veblen, and, of course, Gandhi. For Kumarappa, a "web of rights and obligations" constituted a "natural order," and Ahimsa is the process of recognising these rights and obligations— as well as the fundamental interconnectedness of being— and conforming to them. The task of the policymaker, in his view, is to create institutions that enable humans to act in accordance with these ethical and moral principles. The Web of Freedom points out that neither Kumarappa nor Gandhi believed naively in human goodness. Instead, they thought that one could create institutions that bring about cooperative non-violent tendencies over competitive violent ones. The championing of small-scale industry, a hallmark of Kumarappa's career, has to be understood in this larger ideological context. One illustrative case in the book involves a struggle against official strictures by sugarcane farmers in Madurai district in 1949 and 1950. In order to ensure that a regional sugar mill had an adequate supply of sugarcane, and to get farmers to sell sugarcane to mills at subsidised rates, the central government prevailed upon the Madras government to pass an order that required farmers within a 20-mile radius of the mill to get licences for jaggery production. This move jeopardised the incomes that farmers derived from small-scale jaggery pro-
Epistemicide is the killing of a society’s way of thinking, seeing and doing. Sousa Santos argues that “the Global North” has committed epistemicide around the world.

Kumrappara joint forces with a young Gandhian named Jagganathan, who, in the spirit of satyagraha, protested by laying down in front of a van carrying gur-making equipment confiscated from nearby villages.

The book’s detailed accounts of Kumrappara’s practices counter a frequently cited criticism of the Gandhian programme—that it advocated primitive methods of production and wanted to turn the clock back to a pre-modern past. In fact, both Kumrappara and Gandhi were committed to making improvements in existing techniques of production and methods of organisation, as long as they stayed consistent with core Gandhian principles. For them, khadi production, spinning on the charkha and decentralised small-scale industries were not to be championed because they were “traditional,” nor for the sake of preserving “Indian culture.” Rather, these were ways to generate creative, meaningful work for the vast majority of people, not just for the fortunate few with access to formal education. The strength of Kumrappara’s approach lies in the fact that it starts from the majority’s position in terms of existing skills and knowledge. It does not ask them to wait decades, or generations, to become formally educated and then get in line for jobs that may never materialise.

Kumrappara’s economic theory was based on what he called “sustainable development,” though he used the term “permanence.” Sustainable approaches in the field of economics do not focus on endless growth in material living standards, but on the human economy as part of nature. They place ordinary farmers, workers and artisans at the centre of economic thought, and thus on low-cost, labour-intensive technology with low negative environmental impact, as well as decentralised production. Moreover, they insist that every community should be local, not only because distance deprives consumers of knowledge about the conditions under which goods are produced, and so stilt unethical practices, but also because long-distance transport of daily necessities is ecologically expensive. These same principles can be found in Kumrappara’s economic writings and practice.

Kumrappara was aiding a social movement that directly challenged the hegemony of text-based knowledge over other, practical forms of knowledge. In so doing, he was not Ghandi, attempting to produce a more inclusive alternative to the centrally-organised industrial production system that the country’s post-colonial elite rushed towards.

Seventy years ago, only a small minority of Indians had graduate or post-graduate degrees. These were Macaulay’s children—they were educated in the colonial way of thought, and emulated it even in dissent. This elite class controlled key economic institutions, such as the National Planning Commission, which determined how resources were to be allocated to shape India’s economic future. During the colonial period, Kumrappara disagreed with fellow members of the National Planning Council on almost all accounts, and eventually resigned from the body. After Independence, he was not given a place on the National Planning Commission. The Web of Freedom ends with Kumrappara’s distillation towards the end of his life—he died in 1960—with both the official inheritors of Gandhi’s legacy and the Nehru-led Congress government. Nevertheless, he continued to work towards what is considered the first “knowledge movement” of post-colonial India.

The Gandhian movement posed a challenge to the hegemony of book-learning as well as colonial hierarchies of knowledge, but that challenge was ultimately defeated by the ruling elite. Opposition to the Gandhian programme also came from “unokable” jains, who were exploited and oppressed on the basis of their occupations, which Brahminical thought deemed impure and polluting.

In his debates with Gandhi, BR Ambedkar argued for forsaking the knowledge embedded in undesirable work, and embracing modern education. Ambedkar’s leadership and vision transformed Indian society, not least in contributing to the emergence of Dalits as an organised political force. But at the same time, seven decades after Independence, most Dalits, including Dalits and others from oppressed castes, have not been able to advance through modern education.
The hierarchies of knowledge of contemporary India are still structured by hierarchies of caste.

Post-Hindi India: A Discourse on the Dalit-Bahujan Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolutions, by the political theorist and activist Kancha Ilaiy, launches a fresh attack on caste-based knowledge hierarchies. The book, first published in English in 2000, was published in 2017 in Hindi as Hindustan-Mukh Bharat. Ilaiy takes readers on a tour through a prototypical Tezla village, visiting communities that specialise in different occupations traditionally reserved for oppressed castes. Through various chapters, such as “Unpaid Teachers,” “Subaltern Scientists,” “Social Doctors,” “Meet and Milk Economists” and “Unknown Engineers,” Ilaiy reveals the complexities of Dalit-Bahujan jati society and knowledge. The village’s inhabitants are highly able specialists who, because they lack formal degrees, are never recognised as such by the rest of society. Unlike in dominant-caste society, here men and women work alongside each other, and women are knowledge-creators and teachers in their own right. Ilaiy exposes the divide between existing forms of Brahminical knowledge, which are written down and therefore legitimised, and the knowledge of the Dalit-Bahujan majority, which is largely transmitted through apprenticeship and not recorded in text.

From his other writings and public statements, it is clear that Ilaiy is a strong proponent of modern education, and particularly English-language education, as a means of social and economic mobility for oppressed castes. But in Post-Hindi India, Ilaiy chooses to focus on non-formal systems of knowledge. He argues that the classification of those doing productive work into ostentatiously “lower” classes has done much damage to a potentially fruitful relationship between epistemologies rooted in such work and formal knowledge systems. Ilaiy envisions welding together existing and new forms of knowledge, even if he does not offer clear ways for integrating these into university curricula. Noting that the engineering skills of Dalit-Bahujan communities have never been recorded by Brahmin scholars or allowed into textbooks, he observes that “all these knowledge systems and engineering skills are still out there in our villages—to be seen and improved upon and when the children from these castes get into modern IITs and other engineering institutions, they definitely advance our knowledge of engineering.” Ilaiy implies that Indian society would benefit greatly from a dialogue between these two knowledge systems.

Ilaiy argues that Dalit-Bahujan jatis have been the custodians of scientific thinking in India, a thesis that resonates with the contemporary understanding of the development of technical knowledge in Europe. It is now well-established that in early modern Europe science and mathematicians were the domain of artisans and manual workers, and that these fields grew in connection with the solving of practical problems. As the biochemist LH Johnson proclaimed, “Science owes more to the steam engine than the steam engine owes to Science.” The key inventors of the Industrial Revolution in England, such as James Watt and George Stephenson, were also craftsmen. Craft apprenticeships included training in mathematics, material science and physics. The economist David Landes, in his book The Unbound Prometheus, argues that craftsmen were not “unskilled tinkers,” but possessed sophisticated theoretical knowledge. The historian Pamela Long, in Artisans/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400-1600, states that in early modern Europe, those with university backgrounds engaged in repairs and construction work with artisans. In Europe’s courts, workshops and coffee houses, “the learned taught the skilled, and the skilled taught the learned.” This happened because learned individuals valued practical knowledge “not only for what it could achieve in the material world, but also as a form of knowledge.”

Ilaiy’s book demonstrates that technical knowledge does not exist in a social vacuum, and that mundane occupational practices embody philosophical and worldview. He describes the activities of farmers, milk producers, weavers, barbers, leather-workers and washerfolk, and then examines the values embedded in these. In fact for the “civility-makers” like the barbers, pot makers, leather-tanners, shoemakers, producers of meat and milk, and so on, these texts did not exist, he writes. “What existed for them as symbols of the civilized world were their own tools and instruments and the methods
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of using these tools and instruments for the advancement of Indian society."

Instead of a text-based perspective of Indian civilization, then, Ililah offers a tools-based view, which overpowers both the dominance of the head over the hand, and of text-based, Brahminical knowledge systems over the epistemologies of the Dalit-Bahujan jatis. At times his conclusions can appear tenous—as, for instance, when he values male dhobis as proto-feminists for working alongside women—and he does not always provide ample evidence to back his claims. But to focus on these aspects of the book would be to miss the wood for the trees. Post-Hindu India is a powerful challenge to the Brahminical knowledge structure that deignates skilled, productive work because it has a manual component or is performed by oppressed castes, and makes the case for a new social imagination based on the knowledge of Dalit-Bahujan jatis.

It is difficult to find conditions under which the kind of dialogue between scholars and artisans that Europe saw in past centuries could take place in contemporary India. The social spheres of the two groups are largely distinct, and there are few public spaces where they can interact as equals. The same dichotomy is present in our private lives. I wonder how many readers can count among their close friends a kurir, a mistari, a farmer, or someone who has not completed high school. Until I started my research into the epistemologies of such marginalised specialists, I had none. This is perhaps one reason why economists and policy-makers routinely classify the Indian labour force—90 percent of which works in the informal sector—as overwhelmingly unskilled. As a career economist, I have had to suffer through many studies that use years of formal schooling, or lack thereof, as a proxy measurement of skill. While this approach may be useful in the United States or Europe, where most workers acquire skills through formal education, it makes no sense at all in India.

I began to realise the shortcomings of this approach, and its insidious implications, when I began conducting field research among weavers and other informal workers in Varanasi in 2009. The city has a government institution called the Weavers Service Centre, whose stated aim is to provide technical support to weavers. Once, while wait- ing to meet its director, I introduced myself to his secretary, and told him I was interested in kurir vydha—artisanal knowledge. He asked, "What is that?" The director, on hearing the same term, asked, "You mean 'education'?" He assumed I was interested in the state of formal education among weavers, and complained that their lack of education backgrounds. But overcoming the epistemic schism amid all the complexities of Indian society is not easy. Last semester, while teaching a course on alternative visions of India's future, I had extensive discussions with two Dalit students in my class. In many ways, our debates seemed to lead to the same impasse as the exchanges between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Both of them, echoing Ambedkar, saw in the lokavidiya position an attempt by the dominant castes—in my case, a third-generation educated Brahmin—to deny them their rightful place in the modern economy. I tried to suggest that we move beyond a zero-sum game involving Gandhi or Ambedkar, because both head-versus-hand and caste-based hierarchies need to be challenged. I do not think I convinced either of my students. In this regard, Ililah's work is most useful, because, while championing modern education and learning in English, along Ambedkarite lines, he demonstrates the depth of knowledge that exists in any village. Our universities should be spaces where cultures and knowledge systems can interact as equals, and to mutual benefit. But that ideal is stymied by the colonial history of our institutions of knowledge-production. Most of the oldest of these were created by the Brit- ish to bring into existence a new native elite that would help them rule. They produced scientists, engineers and other specialists who were initially, and for many decades, almost exclusively Brahmins or members of other dominant castes. It was also this colonial system that embalmed English education, and created a model of transmitting knowledge that has remained largely unchanged, even in the post-colonial era. University courses are overwhelm- ingly taught in English, by teachers who are disproportionately from domi- nant castes and emphasise text-based instead of experiential knowledge.

In the heyday of the anti-colonial movements worldwide, leaders fighting European political domination echoed the need for intellectual decolonisation. During the mid-twentieth century, thinkers such as Gandhi, Kamrupapa, Aimé Césaire and Prantz Fanon ar- gued that freedom from colonial rule required the dismantling of colonial forms of education, and a decoloni- sation of the colonised intellect and imagination. Yet in recent decades, this cognitive project has largely been abandoned, and even post-colonial nations have accepted the hegemony of Western economic and knowledge paradigms.

In the twenty-first century, new movements of intellectual critics have brought intellectual decolonisation to the forefront of their political agenda. The Portuguese scholar Bioenventura de Sousa Santos, in his new book Episte- mologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide, analyses how these move- ments have, every time a new world enters into being. "Epistemicide," as the writer uses it, is the killing of ways of thinking, seeing and doing. According to Sousa Santos, knowledge paradigms of the West—or to use the more recent termology, "the Global North"—have com- promised the intellectual project of Western epistemology across the world. The book begins with the assertion that the sum of all human understand- ing of the world far exceeds that of the Western understanding of the world. For Sousa Santos, the intellectual her- itage of the Global North needs to be challenged by the "epistemologies of the South," which implies that people across the world should use "gram- mar and scrip" developed by Western-centric critical theory. Those in the Global South, he observes, have suffered for generations
As an economist, I have read many studies that use years of formal schooling, or lack thereof, as a proxy measurement of skill. Such studies feed the common misconception that the Indian labour force is overwhelmingly unskilled.

One of these was held at the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai, and members of the iron-smelting Agaria tribe of Chatishgarh attended, giving professors a chance to interact with artists adept at producing high-quality iron using small clay furnaces. In the areas of ecology and environmental science, collaborations across knowledge systems between scientists and experts from forest-dwelling and other communities are relatively common.

The Lokavidya, Jan Auldan, a people's movement for lokavidyā, has held gun pamphlets—public forums that assume epistemic equality, where all the participants are considered to be knowledgeable and have something worth contributing to the discussion. In one such pamphlet, I attended in Varanasi, farmers and weavers were of the opinion that the large-scale tendency to call common people ignorant will not break until the walls of the university fall. They elaborated that these "walls" were not just the literal structures, but also the geographical distance between their homes and places of higher learning, the economic barriers between ordinary students and us, and the distance between people's knowledge and science. Many participants complained that universities have created modes of discourse within which lokavidyā-holders are not able to fully express themselves. Breaching the walls of the university would mean creating modes of expression that allow everyone to participate. A television programme on the agrarian crisis, for instance, would host academics and policy experts alongside farmers, with the latter fully empowered to provide analyses and not merely share experiences. Some participants pointed to systems of training and learning in their own communities as models for low-cost, useful education.

One favourable development is that Indian universities—and public universities especially—are today more democratized than they were even a few decades ago, thanks in part to the Green Revolution delivering prosperity to new quarters, and in part to a generation's worth of reservation policies for disadvantaged groups. Yet, thus far, instead of leveraging student diversity to help in an epistemic overhaul, universities have by and large seen it as a threat to the legitimacy of the historical elites that continue to control them. Rather than a broadening of minds, there has been a backlash, manifested in the failure of administrators in almost all public universities to fill faculty posts in reserved categories, and in universities both public and private to check institutional discrimination against Dalit and Adivasi students. And so our colleges and universities remain substantially insulated from the Western universities, where teaching, learning and examinations have become performances to be acted out in order to draw salaries and receive often worthless degrees.

Still, "traditional" and "indigenous" knowledge now enjoy almost mainstream currency, and discussions on economic development, at least in some quarters, even if in highly restricted ways that leave the basic notions of "development" unexplained. It is not unimaginable that soon a new "open university
can be founded, where every department, be it engineering, sociology or music, has holders of lokavidyā as equal members.

In this effort, we have rich intellectual traditions, modern and historical, to draw upon. The Bhakti movement, for instance, was a religious and social movement, but it was also a knowledge movement, which we still remember for the proliferation of literature, poetry and music it produced. In verse, the question of justice was always posed as one about who possesses legitimate knowledge.

Kabi, who was a weaver, poet and philosopher from Varanasi, once famously said, bōhī pādh jāg māa pandit bhūyā na koye—many have died reciting the scriptures, but no one became a pandit. He also wrote:

Jaat na pootho sathā ki, pooth līfīya gyaam
Mēl karē tañhār kar, pādh rahe na rāyan

Don't ask the seeker's caste, ask about knowledge instead.

Learn to value the sword, leave aside the sheath.

Like Kabi, many Bhakti poets were artisans, and their poetry and philosophy derived from a tool-based way of knowing, thinking and imagining another world. Their poetry is suffused with metaphors from their crafts. In one of his abhangs—devotional poems—Tukaram, the beloved bhakti poet of Maharashtra, enumerates these artisan-saints and questions the Vedas. He says that the potmaker Gora, the leatherworker Ravi das, the momin Kabi, the barber Sena, the dancing girl Kanhopatra, the cotton-carder Dadu and the Mahar saint Chakhamuni, according to Tukaram's account, who have no caste. Delivering a final blow, he asks the Brahmins, "Which of your books have saved the fallen? I know of none."

In popular iconography, still visible in workshops across India, these visionaries are often depicted working or surrounded by their tools: Ravidas with his asvil, Kabi at his loom and Gora kneading the mud while chanting the Lord's name. Ironically, Hindutva thought today tries to embrace the bhakti tradition as a symbol of an ostensibly Hindu meritocracy, where knowledge is respected above caste, in an attempt to garner support from the Dalit-Bahujan castes. This is a cynical attempt to neutralize the potent anti-Brahminical threat of the movement. For the bhakti saints, as for the rest of us, challenging Brahminical knowledge hierarchies remains crucial for achieving social and economic justice.

THE COMING CRISIS OF mass unemployment threatens large-scale social unrest and further polarisation in India, but historical and contemporary movements and traditions offer a solution. For those of us who are products of the modern education system, being allies of these movements means adopting an attitude of humility, and acknowledging that there is much we do not know, that our ways of seeing and doing are not the only ways, and that the "educated" and "uneducated" are epistemic equals. To draw on Sousa Santos’s words, there can be no social justice without cognitive justice.