

The search for cognitive justice

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I was a member of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies a decade ago. It was a time when the institution was at its eccentric best. We had many tacit rules for the discussions we had. One taboo revolved around words one could not use. The glossary of unusable words included crisis, progress, nation building and revolution. There was a general feeling that these were tired words that added little to the discussion. Unfortunately, anyone who did use them had to leave the room. The mistakes provoked much laughter and thoughtfulness about the words that we used as black boxes for our own thinking.

It is not that one objected to clichés. After all a cliché is only a printed type. But one realized that some words were tired and overworked, Stakhanovite words stretched to overtime in the Gulags of our mind. What one needed was a vocabulary of key terms that allowed a new set of sensitivities and reciprocities between language and power. But inventing new words is not easy. It reminds me of a story that Jung recounted when the Irish author James Joyce and his son went to meet the psychoanalyst. Joyce was excited about his son's verbal versatility and commented on it to Jung. After some thought Jung replied that in Joyce's case, his words displayed genius, but in his son's case, they showed symptoms of schizophrenia. The relation between word and self and word and world is always a problematic one.

The task is made more complex by the debt we owe some words. Take the word rights. It is such a life affirming word. A right as a claim to being, an ecology of entitlements; a right as an affirmation of citizenship; a right as an empowering word opening domains to marginals and minorities. There is poetry, a power to it even if rights are stated in legal prose. A right to life is a toast to life until the word life changes text and context. Today, when we refer to life, we seem to be referring to a fashionable technique in a genetics laboratory. The word loses its life affirming alchemy.

Unfortunately, the word right faces objections from many quarters. Many claim it is a constituent of a Judeo-Christian cosmos and alien to other cosmologies. Some others suggest that it is a monadic word whose harmony is lost without hyphenation. As a concept, 'rights' is an incomplete civics without the equilibrating harmony of duties. For some, rights is an atlas word holding too

many other worlds such that you have a right to life, to culture, to property, to work, to welfare, to health, to participation, to development, to privacy, to education, to information, the right not to be tortured, and the list goes on. The plethora of worlds the word affirms, guarantees and protects, makes one wonder whether in a managerial sense the word has extended its core competence. It raises many questions. Should rights be extended to collectives or restricted to individuals? Following the Indian and Irish constitutions, should rights be restricted to justiciable claims and others be treated as futuristic promises, rain checks for a future polity?

The danger today is that if 'rights' is a proliferative open-ended term, the words that substituted for it are procrustean, suggesting a panopticon of guarantees rather than an invention of possibilities. One such stolid substitute is the word security. Security was once a simpler word. It was a guarantee of stability and protection in a territorial space under a sovereign. As an old fashioned word, it did its job adequately in an old-fashioned way. But today, security suffixes energy, health, housing and so on. The securitization of the word implies it is a state responsibility, emphasizing not so much access but a guarantee. The word securitization carries a semantic web different from rights. It loses a certain celebratory quality and becomes part of some dismal science. The entire idea gets economized and these sites move from life-world to system, that is, from a lived polysemic reality to a formal organized domain. Security often becomes confused with sustainability. Securitization thus, beginning in the name of rights, ironically reduces rights in the very process of seeking safety, security and sovereignty.

One often wishes that one could return to the old idea of the commons. A commons was a place around the village where the farmers had access to grazing land, timber for building and firewood, and herbs for medicine. More than a collective space for resources it was a site which sustained old skills, forms of competence and improvisation critically required in a subsistence society. A commons went beyond the idea of individual rights and private property to an idea of collective access.

In the West the idea of the commons disappeared with the enclosure movement and in India, with the unfolding of development. The tragedy of the commons in India lies not in its erosion but its destruction. As long as the forest was a cosmos and a commons, a realm of knowledge, nature remained intact. A commons allowed for improvisation preventing the museumization of knowledge.

The old idea of the commons as space and as metaphor is now being revived as a part of cyberspace, but the nature of Intellectual Property Rights may make such a collective being difficult. A commons guaranteed the world of subsistence; it was not an annexe to affluence. The question before us is stark. What concepts can

democratic imagination create around knowledge which makes it both creative and life sustaining? Is the idea of rights adequate? Is a commons of knowledge realistic? This problem was articulated in an acute form in a conversation I had over a decade ago with a group of activists representing denotified tribals (DNT) in India.

They came one day with a simple request. They wanted me to help choreograph a seminar, not in the academic sense of the term but more as an invitation to a hearing, a *sunwai*. They wanted a meeting of the knowledges which were not just statements of methods but meetings of ways of life. They proposed an encounter between healers, tribal ethno-botanists, tribal patients, policemen, psychiatrists, doctors, ethno-psychiatrists, bureaucrats and science policy people. For them, words like participation, voice, or a right to information were crucial but not sufficient. These tribal groups wanted to create sensitivity to their situation but from a variety of viewpoints. As denotified tribes, they carried the stigma of criminality. Even now police stations house a few of them, some of whom are beaten up or shot every time there is a middle class plea for law and order. Given their frequent encounters with violence, they were paranoid about the police. They also reported that they suffered from a variety of diseases, from alcoholism to gastro-intestinal problems.

Even more critically these groups were subject to sickle cell anaemia, with a large part of the tribe dying by the age of 35. They did not want to be merely subjected to the clinical gaze. They reported that a Harvard University academic had visited them, interrogated them and disappeared with the data, an experience that was deeply unsettling. Research, they felt, had to go beyond the professional paper. They wanted a dialogue of knowledges between different medicines, different legal systems where doctors and patients conversed not merely on symptoms and medicines but epistemologies and cosmologies. They wanted more than a hearing. They wanted a move from voice to theory and insisted on the location of their theories in science and science policy.

Little happened, but one constructive move that emerged was the use of genealogies as a part of their ID cards to create precautionary rules of avoidance. This was intended to show them how to minimize sickle cell disease. It was not to be used to ostracize or stigmatize but to minimize the further incidence of sickle cell anaemia.

The conversation with the activists outlines the challenge, the contours of our problem. One can understand it better in terms of the current civics of the

technological world, the transfer of technology or innovation model. Transfer of technology is a theory of development that sees science as travelling from the centre to the periphery, metropolis to province. Science is the prime source of knowledge and it has its origins or concentration in the metropolis. Unlike science, other sources of knowledge are seen as ethno-science, superstition or more brutally, non-knowledge. Pre-scientific is a word that is often used, along with savage or primitive. Invention, as far as possible, takes place at the centre, while the drama of innovation and diffusion occurs at the periphery.

The feasibilities of the rule game are different at each stage. Science as invention is black boxed. Technology can be localized and adapted. The rituals of adaptation are through local resources, local skills or some forms of local knowledge. Diffusion is consumption. One consumes science but never questions it. Diffusion performs the equivalence of democratization. To diffuse a technology is to democratize it.

The logic of the civics is overtly and tacitly hegemonic. Consider for a start, the relation of science to other forms of knowledge. The latter belong to a lesser hierarchical domain. Even if something of value is noticed, like a botanical fragment, the drug is appropriated without any acknowledgement of the local, native, indigenous epistemologies that generated it. The product is appropriated while process is often ignored. Traditional knowledge within this structure faces a limited set of options.

First, ecocide – where nature and a people, along with the system of knowledge that accompanies them, is either eliminated or museumized. Second, the knowledge can be ghettoized and considered as unofficial or illegal through certain forms of intellectual apartheid. The third option is to hierarchize knowledges. In this, the traditional domain is labelled the lesser form and can at best exist as marginal knowledges practiced within the informal economy. Expert knowledge, by contrast, is always treated as scientific knowledge. Sometimes the hierarchy becomes a temporary circle and local knowledge is seen as an ‘ethno-science’, an act of ‘make do’, or what Levi Strauss calls bricolage. The pragmatic possibilities are acknowledged but the theoretical possibilities are truncated. The bricoleur still belongs to a lesser cognitive world.

In such a world science remains immaculate, but technology is subject to the local. The intermediate technology movement centred around E. F. Schumacher. Many of the Gandhians and scientists like Amulya Reddy who, among his many experiments, substantially developed the ideas of biogas technology or P.K. Sethi

who invented the Jaipur foot, belonged to this domain. The key words were adaptation and participation and a whole regime of democracy was visualized around it, especially in Robert Chambers' *Farmer First*. If diffusion valorized science and technology and merely wanted an amplifier, such as a social movement like the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) to take science to the villages, Chambers insisted that locality be given a voice, and the right to participate.

This vision included notions of referendum and recall of the technologies, the idea of the right to information. The demand here was not for an amplifier for science but a hearing aid for technology. It involved insistence that science go beyond the clinical gaze to an act of listening. The sense of community and of local knowledge became crucial. But the emphasis was still on voice rather than theory, a democratization of the processes of innovation but not yet of knowledge. The axiomatics of scientific knowledge still remained immaculately intact.

It was only when the black box of science was prised away from a textbook regime that only recognized dominant forms of knowledge to admit to a different understanding that science became open to democracy. It demanded the availability of eccentricity or dissent within a paradigm. It demanded the recognition of knowledges other than science, seen not within the lens of science or the litmus test of scientific proof but as ways of living that had their own cognitive validity. It demanded, as it were, a space of cognitive indifference to science.

Democracy as a theory of difference has to recognize not the universal validity of science but the plural availability of knowledges, that no form of knowledge can be forcibly museumized and that memory and innovation intrinsically go together. The idea of alternatives in science allows for alternative sciences, for competing universalisms. Both the alternative and Luddite critique of technology are now seen not as fundamentalisms but other ways of constructing knowledge.

There is a radical departure in the politics of knowledge that we must recognize. Voice, protest, resistance, participation, and rights do not exhaust the framework of democracy. For that what one needs is a democracy of knowledges.

The concept of cognitive justice was serendipitously proposed by the author as a rubric for just such a realization. Cognitive justice recognises the right of different forms of knowledge to co-exist, but adds that this plurality needs to go beyond tolerance or liberalism to an active recognition of the need for diversity. It demands recognition of knowledges, not only as methods but as ways of life. This presupposes that knowledge is embedded in ecology of knowledges where each knowledge has its place, its claim to a cosmology, its sense as a form of life. In this

sense knowledge is not something to be abstracted from a culture as a life form; it is connected to livelihood, a life cycle, a lifestyle; it determines life chances.

As Heidegger put it, knowledge is a dwelling, a way of life one lives and lives out not just a system or as a formal set of disembodied properties. Every form of citizenship is a claim to a culture of competence, a set of skills. The great geologist and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy stated it brilliantly. He defined a proletarian as not a man alienated from his means of production, but as a person disembodied from his culture and the forms of knowledge it offers.

Cognitive justice is not a lazy kind of insistence that every knowledge survives as is, where is. It is an idea which is actually more playful in the sense the Dutch historian Johann Huizinga suggested when he said play transcends the opposition of the serious and the non-serious. Play seeks encounters, the possibilities of dialogue, of thought experiments, a conversation of cosmologies and epistemologies. A historical model that comes to mind is the dialogue of medical systems, where doctors once swapped not just their theologies but their cures. As A. L. Basham put it, the dialogue of medicines, each based on a different cosmology, was never communal or fundamentalist. It recognized incommensurability but allowed for translation.

Translation, as one of my literary friends told me, is a process requiring that a truth to be a truth must be articulated in two languages. Brecht would not be Brecht unless he was available in Malayalam. It is often an act of trusteeship, as when Muslim scholars kept Greek texts alive for the West to avail of later. Without that archive, western civilization may not have been the intellectual possibility it is today.

The dangers of a false translation, as a narrowing down of possibilities of the authenticity of a way of life, must be recognized. A culture like a craft is not just a set of outputs, of products to be listed in a craft catalogue. What one loses as a result, especially in a craft catalogue, is the sense of process; the embodied sense of being that allows a craft to be evaluated not only in terms of productivity but in terms of an ecology of being.

A clay pot is a sensorium where in firing a pot, colour, smell, touch and the quality of clay, all come into being. The word tacit knowledge does not capture all of it. It is the sense of variety, of judgement, of inherent diversity that goes into a craft. While arguing against the spread of synthetic chemistry, Ananda Coomaraswamy held that the organic red dye was a different kind of red wherein each village involved in the art of dyeing produced its own dialect of red, which synthetic chemistry could destroy. It is a sense of the varieties of colour as a diversity of

traditions. Here, craft is a process that keeps that diversity alive by keeping the traditions of redness alive.

Diversity becomes crucial for cognitive justice, first in itself. In that sense the idea belongs more to scientists like Alfred Wallace and J.B.S. Haldane who emphasized that evolution sought not the capitalist survival of the fittest but diversity. Francis Zimmerman, in a wonderful article on Haldane, observes that the scientist was intrigued at the peacock feathers and the sculpted horns of the goat. He realized that there was no functional reason for such variety of beauty. Diversity was a mode of being in and for itself. In a cultural sense, diversity has a bigger rationale, not just as a mode of survival but as an axiomatic of difference that makes democracy possible. A diversity of knowledges, unmuseumized and dialogic, becomes an anchor for an inventive democratic imagination.

If diversity is a recognition of difference, plurality is an engagement across differences. Ziauddin Sardar, a South Asian scholar of science, argues one aspect of it. He claimed that as a British citizen he had a right of access to the National Health System, but as a Muslim he also required access to his own notion of healing. The one without the other was incomplete as an entitlement. An entitlement to a form of knowledge is a part of any bundle of rights. But there is a third argument for plurality.

Many expert systems tend to be iatrogenic. Iatrogeny is doctor induced illness, where the very form of diagnosis or therapy adds to the complexity of the ailment. Iatrogeny thus demands that the patient becomes a person of knowledge coping with the limits of any medical system. A plurality of medicinal systems may mute the pathology of any one dominant form. Plurality is the guarantee that alternative solutions and alternative paths to problem solving are always available within a culture.

The plurality that cognitive justice entails demands a diversity of the ideas of time. Globalization and citizenship today are built on the instant time of financial capital, on speed, on factory time. Tribal time, body time, festival time, the varieties of ecological time have no real place in the official time tables of citizenship. Underlying modernity is the time of progress and the time of progress allows for the everydayness of obsolescence, the triage of defeated and marginal groups.

Progress and its sibling, the logic of development, enforce violence in the form of their procrustean ideas of time where societies become dated, anachronistic, museumized, primitive and are, therefore, open to development. What one would

like to demand as part of cognitive justice is the constitutionality of multiple times. Leaving it only to civil society will not do. One needs to build it into the constitution as part of its preamble or through the Directive Principles. Once one creates a commons of times, one can face the issue of property head-on.

Indian law differentiates between stock and flow. Chhatrapati Singh, a philosopher of law, has pointed out that in Indian jurisprudence land as stock could be considered as property, but water was flow. One could use the water that flowed through one's land but one could not possess it. What one would like to suggest is that knowledge and information are flows. To treat them as stock violates the local sense of justice. Second, even if knowledge becomes stock, heritage, memory and legacy are still acts of trusteeship. They can only become parts of an intellectual commons. Third, patenting life violates the sacredness of life, the connectedness of life. To patent life is to be anti-ecolocate.

For the above reasons knowledge as intellectual property violates the idea of cognitive justice and demands that we reject the institution of IPR. One is not merely suggesting a state of exception, arguing, for example, that during an epidemic Aids medicines be considered outside the intellectual property frame. What one is advocating is a complete secession, a rejection of the IPR regime. If India, China, Brazil and South Africa reject IPR, the chances of such a regressive institution surviving are minimal.

Once again, one is reminded of Ananda Coomaraswamy's definition of the artist. He said that an artist is not a special kind of man in the pursuit of his vocation; instead every man is an artist in the pursuit of his vocation. Coomaraswamy's argument is made on the basis of the rejection of the distinction between art and craft. Similarly what we need to challenge is the idea of the scientist as a special kind of citizen, the expert. Modern economics seems to suggest that it is the scientist in the laboratory who innovates. What we would like to suggest, almost in a Maoist or Gandhian sense, is that every citizen is an inventor. To survive one improvises all the time. To treat invention as a superior kind of improvisation may not be fair. In fact it could be invidious to valorize the small changes made by the scientist over a commons of inventions made by craftsman, tribal and peasants. The idea of cognitive justice demands a reopening of our ideas of law, intellectual property and democracy and inventiveness.

Behind the logic of innovation and patenting is the logic of exclusion and obsolescence. It truncates a community and emasculates those who don't possess or cannot cope with a particular form of knowledge. Also, instead of democratizing

‘problem-solving’ as something done by all, both in everydayness and in crisis, we mark it off as the domain of professionally certified experts. Such definitions based on binaries devalue forms of knowledge like folklore, mother’s recipes, rule of thumb, failing to recognize the creative power of ‘muddling through’ as something more life giving than the plan.

A right to information without an access to the diversities of knowledge available homogenizes democratic imagination. The current ideas of science, especially notions such as resilience, reveals that even a sense of scale demands diversity. Scaling a problem today creates issues of panarchy rather than hierarchy, where the solution to a problem may involve a variety of answers. Diversity built into the act of problem solving thus democratizes itself.

The idea of cognitive justice thus sensitizes us not only to forms of knowledge but to the diverse communities of problem solving. What one offers then is a democratic imagination with a non-market, non-competitive view of the world, where conversation, reciprocity, translation create knowledge not as an expert, almost zero-sum view of the world but as a collaboration of memories, legacies, heritages, a manifold heuristics of problem solving, where a citizen takes both power and knowledge into his own hands.

These forms of knowledge, especially the ideas of complexity, represent new forms of power sharing and problem-solving that go beyond the limits of voice and resistance. They are empowering because they transcend the standard cartographies of power and innovation which are hegemonic. By incorporating the dynamics of knowledge into democracy, we reframe the axiomatics of knowledge based on hospitality, community, non-violence, humility and a multiple idea of time, where the citizen as trustee and inventor visualizes and creates a new self reflexive idea of democracy around actual communities of practice.

The dialogue of the sciences, of East and West, need no longer be conducted across the old dichotomies of tradition and modernity, of development and underdevelopment. Nor can we survive on the categories the West provides us in terms of democracy, property or rights. We have to invent words in English to say what the West cannot. The search for cognitive justice is a step in that direction, an attempt to realize that while the West is a part of us, the words we borrowed from it may have different career graphs. We need ‘thought experiments’ that disturb both worlds and allow both the self and other to confront each other in a kaleidoscope of new experiences.



