

Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis
 A Multidisciplinary Publication of Centre for Research
 Maitreyi College, University of Delhi
 October 2024, Volume 5 Issue 2

ISSN: 2582-7391

Book Review

Gyan ki Rajneeti: Samaj Adhyayan aur Bhartiya Chintan

by

Manindranath Thakur

Setu Prakashan Pvt. Ltd., First Edition (4 May 2022). Year of Publication: 2023

ISBN-13:978-9393758415

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Received: 21st July, 2024; Accepted: 11th September, 2024; Published: 31st October, 2024

The notion that the field of social science in India have developed in a colonial situation and carry its imprint even to this day has been an accepted thesis in Indian academic circles. The same holds for the emergence of social science in several post-colonial non-Western nations where social sciences took hold in the backdrop of colonialism. In the late 1970's in the backdrop of decolonization, and the publication of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), there emerged a global debate among academicians of the Global South to indigenize social sciences by moving beyond the modernist-Western paradigm which claimed universality and was based on twin concepts of cartesian dualism and Newtonian physics. Charges of Euro-centrism in social science theories gained ground, and an explosive question cropped up; "*the social sciences that originated in the West, are indigenous to the West, or are they necessarily universal for the rest?*" (Mukherji, 2004, p. 16). This question intrigued several academicians across the globe, and the question was debated and discussed in seminars and conferences and the case for the indigenization of social sciences was pushed.

In India, the question of indigenization has been a part of the historical development of social sciences. It was discussed during the colonial period chiefly by social reformers (Sharma & Borgohain, 2024, p. 234). In the post-colonial period the issue of decolonization and indigenization was debated and discussed by social scientists such as Louis Dumont, Radha Kamal Mukherjee, Ramakrishna Mukherjee, Yogendra Singh, and others inside the institutional frameworks of academia (Sharma, 2019), and perhaps, reached its high noon with the call for *constructing an Indian ethnosociology* by McKim Marriott in 1989, which appeared in volume 23, Issue 1 of the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Five papers from this volume were later compiled and published under the title '*India Through Hindu Categories*' (1990). This work, which called for the adoption of indigenous cultural categories in the study of Indian society, provoked a lot of positive as well as critical responses but also opened up the space and a direction for the project, but ultimately no breakthrough was realized. The goal of academic decolonization and indigenization remains a challenge for Indian academics despite multiple attempts expanding nearly thirty years since Marriot's efforts. However, the current global crisis, especially the growing discourse around the Anthropocene, impending climate crisis, and the failure of the modernist-developmental paradigm to curtail poverty and social injustice has again provoked global discussions around the indigenization of social sciences and the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems for societal transformation.

It is in this scenario, that Mahindranath Thakur's book *Gyan Ki Rajneeti: Samaj Adhyayan aur Bhartiya Chintan* (Politics of Knowledge: Social Studies and Indian Thought) published by Setu Prakashan made its appearance in the bookstalls in the year 2023. Thakur, a professor of political science at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, has been long involved with the project of critiquing the impact of colonialism on the practice of social science disciplines in India. This work hopefully is the first book length instalment of his project to develop a social science framework that is free from power relations, is capable of capturing social reality – both Indian and global - as comprehensively as possible, and plays a significant role in social transformation, which according to Thakur should be the ultimate aim of every pursuit of knowledge.

The book has a long preface and is organised into six chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The chapters are written in a manner that each individual chapter presents the arguments and hypotheses of the entire book. The objective behind this structuring according to the author is that if a reader wants to read just one chapter or is unable to read the entire book, s/he will get the gist of the entire book without having to depend on other chapters. Chapters one through four are organised logically. The first chapter discusses how colonialism played an important role in the devaluation of knowledge systems of colonized societies, and persistence of the colonial paradigm in the post-colonial era mainly through institutionalized knowledge production and dissemination, leading to a politics of knowledge. The second chapter mainly discusses the limitations of the modern Western paradigm of knowledge production and the impasse it has created. The author has outlined the argument regarding the nature of social studies/sciences in the Indian context in the third chapter and has offered a framework to resolve the impasse. The fourth chapter discusses the proposed framework built from the elements of Indian knowledge tradition, and how it can be operationalized. In the next two relatively stand-alone chapters, the author discusses the meaning and practice of democracy, and how it can be made richer, followed by a discussion of the liberating potential of religion, which in the dominant discourse is understood as an oppressive structure.

Few salient points cum thesis moved by the author in the book are:

- i) Modern Western knowledge system, which is based on the twin scientific foundations of Cartesian dualism and Newtonian physics, coupled with the dominant trend of Enlightenment philosophy which reduced human beings to mere rational and self-interested actors, is inadequate to study human society, not only in the East or the global south but also in the Western society.
- ii) Colonialism categorized Indian/Indigenous knowledge systems as backward, thereby delegitimizing its epistemic value. Consequently, the colonial politics of knowledge reduced Indian philosophy to 'religious' philosophy which has been legitimized in the post-colonial era as Indian philosophy to this date is studied not as philosophy in itself, but as religion and is largely absent from secular academic curricula. Even if present, Indian philosophy largely exists for comparison purposes with Western philosophy where the latter from the vantage point for all comparisons.
- iii) The advancements in natural sciences, particularly in development of Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum physics, and chaos theory in the scientific domains has severely challenged the Cartesian and Newtonian conceptions of what constitutes "science" and "scientific". Additionally, philosophers such as Karl Popper and Roy Bhaskar also developed the scope for a far more expansive definition of "science" in their writings. These developments have influenced the prevailing social science frameworks and theories, creating room for alternative discourses reflected in post-modern theory.

- iv) In light of these observations, *Gyan Ki Rajneeti* proposes moving beyond Cartesian dualism and the Enlightenment-induced monolithic view of human beings as rational and self-interested actors. The author makes the case for acknowledging that people are complex, multifaceted creatures whose social behaviours are driven by emotions such as love, compassion, and collaboration in addition to the pursuit of self-interest.
- v) The author then proposes a framework for social analysis derived from Indian philosophical tradition which consists of twelve elements; namely the four *purusharthas* (*dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksha*), six *vikaras* namely *kama* (lust), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *moha* (emotional attachment), *matsarya* (envy), and *mada* (ego). These ten elements according to the author are internal determinants of human nature, while the rest two, *desha* (space) and *kala* (time) are external variables. Together, these twelve variables play an important role in determining the social actions of human beings and have a bearing on the nature of society and social relations (Thakur, 2022, p. 106). The author recognizes that this approach, of taking a large number of variables into account in the study of any social phenomenon will make it difficult in execution, but since social reality is formed by these factors, it is imperative to consider them if any study wants to get as close as possible to capture the existing social reality and dynamics.
- vi) Thakur argues that these twelve elements must not be understood merely as aims or emotions but as concepts. The *purushartha* should be understood as a social institution meant to regulate and operationalize society. For example, *artha* should be understood as an economic institution, *kama* as the institution of the family, marriage, and regulation of sexual relations; *dharma* as the institution of religion, morality, and social intercourse, *moksha* as the institution of living a happy and content life, and the six *vikaras* as motive for social action (Unlike the modern Western view of humans in which only one *vikara* i.e. greed is recognized as the premises of social actions).
- vii) The author advocates for the inclusion of experiential knowledge as a form of inquiry and in the social science curricula by citing Prof. Tulsi Ram's autobiography, *Murdhaiya*. According to Thakur, the existing approaches of social science disciplines are constrained by their design to concentrate on and capture a small number of social reality's facets. However, autobiographies that depict the writer's life in the context of all social interactions and structures, may be a superior form of social science writing.
- viii) Lastly, the author emphasizes the importance of religion and calls for viewing religion as an integral part of human life without any value judgment. Rather than rejecting religion as an institution meant for social control or legitimation of oppressive structures, Thakur makes a case for recognizing the potential of religion for social change and transformation by citing the liberation theology movements in Latin America. Through the case study of two Hindi novels, *Ananddas ka Potha* by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi and *Kankal* by Jaishankar Prasad, Thakur shows that the mechanism of internal critique has been an integral part of Hindu religious traditions, and it is only through this dynamic aspect that Hinduism has grown in last five thousand years. The reference to these two novels is also a call for the integration of literature in social science studies and as the mode of inquiry.

At the outset, it might seem that *Gyan Ki Rajneeti* is calling for developing what McKim Marriott called an ethno-sociology of India. But Thakur again and again emphasizes that his project is not to create an ethnocentric or a native social science, but a call for dialogue between the dominant Western model of social science which has reached its saturation point, and the Indigenous knowledge systems of non-Western cultures and societies.

Spread over 300 pages, and structured in the traditional Indian method of debate of *purva* (the salient points of opponent view) and *uttar paksha* (refutation of *purva paksha* and presentation of new thesis), the central theme of the book is a call for multilateral dialogue and conversation between a) Indian Philosophical traditions, b) social sciences, and c) philosophical traditions of different cultures and civilizations, and the Western philosophical tradition, outside the current prevalent differential power relations between the former three and the latter, with the objective to create a better conceptual framework for grasping social reality and developing new knowledge (Thakur, 2022, p. 78). It can be said that *Gyan Ki Rajneeti* is a serious intervention in the current dilemmas of knowledge production, consumption, and dissemination. This work has the potential to provide a framework for decolonizing knowledge production, at least in the Indian context.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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How to cite this article: Tripathy, H. (2024). *Gyan Ki Rajneeti: Samaj Adhyayan aur Bhartiya Chintan*. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*, 5(2), 66-69.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52253/vjta.2024.v05i02.07>

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