Academic Dependency on Western Disciplinary Knowledge and Captive Mind among South Asian Sociologists: A Critique

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Abstract

This paper examines academic dependency and its various dimensions in sociology in the South Asian context. It is argued that the global knowledge order constructed during the colonial period and sustained in the post-colonial conditions is an unequal one favouring North American and European centres of learning. It is also argued that the disciplinary knowledge including concepts, theories and methods inherited from metropolitan centres of the global North and maintained by sociologists in the global South do not necessarily provide the tools necessary for grasping the social realities in formerly colonised countries of South Asia. Thus, it is important to rediscover threads of indigenous knowledge and incorporate them in teaching sociology and the conduct of socially relevant research. In this exercise, a survey of views expressed by leading sociologists adopting a post-colonial or pluralist perspective and Southern Theory perspective such as Connell, Santos, Alatas, and Patel is presented. The paper emphasises the need for South Asian sociologists to take serious and systematic steps for developing indigenous sociology based on intellectual traditions in the region instead of continuing to be dependent on the inherited sociology disciplinary knowledge, concepts, theories, methods and approaches as givens.
Keywords**:** academic dependency, western knowledge, South Asian sociologists, colonial period

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Introduction

Over the recent decades, sociologists, including those from South Asia, have raised concerns about the validity of social sciences inherited from the West or metropolis in the global north, to comprehend social realities in the global south. They have pointed out that the relationship between Western social science centres of teaching and learning vs. those of the global south, in particular Asia, is an unequal one. This inequality is reflected in the way sociology is practiced in Asia in its diverse forms, e.g. teaching, research, publications, knowledge construction. 'Social scientists working in the periphery have a strong orientation to the world centres of their disciplines in the metropole' (Connell, 2007, p. 217), where there is a concentration of technically trained workforce in universities, corporations, and the state. 'The practices of connection include academic travel, patronage and sponsorship, publication, and the formation of research networks' (p. 218). As such, 'ideas, terminology and research technologies get exported from the metropole to the periphery' (p. 218).

Using a political-economic perspective, Syed Hussein Alatas (2006) has explored this subject in detail. According to him, the relationship between the social sciences in the West and the Third World is an unequal one. To understand it, one has to scrutinize the global division of labour in the social sciences (pp. 60-61). Alatas argues that the global division of labour in social sciences plays a significant role in maintaining the structures of academic dependency (p. 57). While noting that imperialist relations in the social sciences parallel those in the international political economy, he closely looks at academic dependency, academic imperialism, and the global division of labour and states that 'the development and expansion of social science in developing societies is influenced by and is a reflection of its development in the United States, and to a lesser extent in Great Britain, France, Germany and Japan' (p. 60) . His delineation of the subject includes various forms of academic dependence in ideas, media, technology, aid for research, and investment in education (pp. 61-70).

Several social scientists from South Asian countries have also highlighted the features of academic dependency in social sciences in general and sociology in particular. According to Sabir, 'it is widely argued by the region's sociologists and others that an academic dependency has been created in the relationship between South Asian

sociology scholars/scholarship and those from the Euro-American centres of learning and 'Western' sociology' (Sabir, 2010, p. 36). Patel describes how the functionalist sociological language and knowledge, in particular modernisation theory, were diffused from the US to the rest of the world and sociology was institutionalised in ex-colonial countries legitimising the colonial project of modernity and creating academic dependency (Alatas, 2006, pp. 387-388). This situation of dependency has been described by the term 'captive mind'. Perpetuation of colonial knowledge is the result of a captive mind. 'Even an intellectually lively society like India has generally failed to indigenize the social sciences' (p. 24) .

The 'captive mind' syndrome means the application of the American and European social sciences to Asian settings 'without the appropriate adaptation of imported ideas and techniques' (p. 30). This kind of uncritical imitation of Western social science is described by Alatas as a sign of continuing intellectual domination. It 'pervades all levels of scientific enterprise including problem-setting, analysis, abstraction, generalization, conceptualization, description, explanation, and interpretation' (Alatas, 1972a, pp. 09-10 cited by Alatas, p. 30).

In this paper, I examine this theme in more detail in the context of South Asia based on a review of relevant literature.

Academic dependence in South Asian country contexts

South Asian sociologists have observed the existence of academic dependency in sociology in their own countries. For example, Sabir (2010) states that 'the historical factors that initially imposed academic dependency on the US by Pakistani sociologists and their isolation from its own endogenous scientifically valid knowledge production process raise some serious concerns for the investigators of sociology of sociology and of the sociology of knowledge' (p. 36). He considers the Pakistan-US academic relationship as creating a vicious circle of intellectual dependency. Introducing sociology in Pakistan, the United States played a key role in the early stage of dependency (pp. 12-13). According to him,

> The US departure from Pakistan in the late 1960s and early
> 1970s marked a dividing line between the era of the dependent,
> but progressing, sociology and the era of an isolated and
> stagnated sociology. It is essential to emphasize that with the
> departure of the US from Pakistan, the country became totally

removed epistemologically, conceptually and cognitively from the evolution of sociology in the rest of the world, yet it carried on in the spirit of inertia (p. 29).

Pakistani sociologists have contributed 'to the international division of scientific labour as the producers of data' (p. 29). Furthermore, 'more sociological studies on Pakistan have been conducted by European and American scholars than by Pakistanis themselves' (p. 29).

On the issue of academic dependency, Sabir does not advocate termination of 'cooperation in the form of an international division of scientific labor… in order to give birth to a genuine and culturally imbedded intellect. Doing such would likely push them into quasi-isolation, as is evident from the case of Pakistan' (p. 36). Nor does he advocate 'covert Western dependency in the knowledge production process' (p. 36). Thus in countries like Pakistan, as long as sociologists remain in a parasitic relation with the developed world, or isolated from the international scientific community and its knowledge production process, Sabir believes that it would result in captive minds (p. 37).

Sociologists have commented on the fact that the "de-linking" of the global and the national to the local becomes clear from a look at the "state of sociology" writings in Nepal. 'Most such writings fail to see the multiple levels of embeddedness involved in the evolution of sociology and social anthropology in Nepal' (Mishra, 2005, p. 101). According to Misra, Bhattachan's (1987; 1997) review showed that disciplinary progress is much slower; even after five decades there has been no original theoretical contribution; Sociologists are preoccupied with "filling in". Instead Misra argues that sociologists should focus on local experiences; synthesize the Western and the indigenous; and ensure that equality and social justice should become key themes (p. 112). These observations and comments show that sociology in Nepal has been inward-looking in its focus, leading to a disciplinary narrowness.

Patel (2006) discusses how the British-produced Indian tradition and the theory of the Aryan invasion of India created a basic division of groups into castes and tribes - though castes were only one among many groups – and how the village was given a geographical demarcation. She explains how the colonial conquest was sustained by cultural techniques of rule (pp. 383-386). According to her, Indian

students were taught that their own society was traditional and yet moving towards modernity. Traditional structures were introduced as religion, caste, kinship and family. Students were taught that India 'would mirror the process as they occurred in the West' (p. 388). She shows the pervasive nature of the Western anthropological and social science designs in terms of power and control. In a recent article she explores how 'Eurocentrism is not merely represented in sociological theories and methods but also enmeshed in practices and sites that administer and govern sociological knowledge, such as journals and curricula' (Patel, 2014).

Referring to the massive growth of sociology teaching in India since its inception in 1919, Patel (2010b, pp. 280-291) examines the historical evolution of the discipline in India in three phases. She critically reviews the work of Ghurye, whose approach was indological (study of scriptures) and empiricist; Srinivas, who adopted a functionalist-ethnographic approach to village studies (emphasizing the organic integration of castes and naturalizing Indian tradition rather than defining tradition as constructed by colonial modernity), Desai's work, adopting a Marxist approach, focused on state, class and power, the 'Lucknow framework' focusing on social practice, and the manner higher education was expanded to the provinces in the 60s. The latter development has downgraded sociology teaching to the lowest common denominator with a soft, commonsensical subject, making it into a challenge to sociology practice in India. The second challenge relates to the demands from below in the 70s and 80s in the form of various social movements from agricultural industrial, and urban sectors, and middle and lower castes. Some sociologists have used these voices from below to create new sociological practices such as postcolonial studies, feminist and Dalit studies. However, Patel also states that they have not questioned the episteme of colonial modernity, its universalisation of history, scientific reasoning, and the binaries created by the former. She argues that 'the discipline's identity in colonial discourses and its contemporary routinization in terms of practices of transmission are organically related' (pp. 280-281).

Writing on the deteriorating academic standards in social sciences and the conditions responsible in the Sri Lankan context, Perera (2012) states that the intellectual set up in university departments teaching sociology and anthropology are anti-intellectual and mediocre. The disciplines have lost their intellectual edge in the

country and no serious debate has occurred about the contemporary relevance of sociology and anthropology or other pertinent issues such as subjectivity vs. objectivity, ethnography vs. theory. In general, regular exchange of views and the tolerance of plurality of ideas are absent in social sciences (p. 96).

According to Hettige (2010), '(t)he hierarchical relationship between the Western centres of knowledge production on the one hand and academic peripheries in the developing world on the other is often reproduced within each peripheral country as well' (p. 302). For example, 'marginalized scholars have no familiarity with the developments in international sociology and become increasingly insular in orientation' (p. 301). Many use outdated textbooks. What students receive is 'an incoherent amalgam of material drawn from a few sources' (p. 302).

He explains why there has been little prospect of an independent and critical sociological tradition emerging in Sri Lanka in the face of deteriorating academic standards and a trend toward nativism, even after sixty years of independence.

Nationalist forces command a pervasive influence on educational institutions, including universities. Most university students remain largely cut off from Western, liberal academic traditions. With most teachers being the product of local universities, school children in general are not exposed to secular, liberal ideas emanating from dominant social science traditions. Those who have internalized such ideas constitute a small minority; while nativistic ideas linked to identity, nation-state, history, development, etc., dominate the public discourse, politics, and inter-group relations alike (Hettige, 2010, p. 302).

Goonatilake (2001) provides a critique of anthropological work on Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s founded on Western knowledge and philosophy by analyzing the work of four selected anthropologists. While being critical of Western social science in general, he explains how Buddhism, the main religion in Sri Lanka, provides a more appropriate epistemological framework to understand and explain contemporary human and social problems.

In terms of these reviews about the state of sociology in Sri Lanka, the delinking of the present generation of sociologists is emphasized with its negative consequences more than the hegemony

of Western sociology and academic dependence on Western social sciences. Unlike other sociologists in the region, Hettige or Perera do not provide a critique of Western modernity or colonial influence in social sciences. Nor do they speak about the 'captive mind' among social scientists. The focus is rather on how sociology practices have degenerated in comparison to the benchmarks set by Western-trained sociologists and anthropologists of the bygone era. On the contrary, Goonatilake's work (2001) includes a critique of Western theoretical and epistemological domination in the reviewed anthropological writings dealing with Sri Lanka.

Writing about hybrid sociology where theory and/or method come from one tradition and data come from another, Kais (2010) explores academic dependency, the captive mind, and the marginalized position of sociology in colonized countries. Taking Bangladesh as an example, Kais characterises the development of sociology there as an example of borrowing from the West.

The lack of resources and facilities for research in universities and the involvement of academics in NGOI-led research do not contribute to the production of necessary sociology knowledge or sociologists with analytical-critical thinking abilities and the capability to produce alternative theories and paradigms in social sciences (Kais, 2010, p. 345). In this context, there is a tendency for academic dependency, and the 'captive mind syndrome has even been institutionalized' (p. 348). According to him, for the Bangladeshi sociologists, it is practicable and labour saving 'to simply borrow theories and concepts from Western sociology, applying them to the Bangladesh context by using methods innovated in the core countries' (p. 347). As an example of academic dependency he cites the practice of Bangladeshi sociologists preferring to publish in metropolitan journals.

According to Islam and Islam who review the crisis of sociology in Bangladesh, sociologists 'have concerned themselves little with theory and method' (Islam & Islam, 2005, p. 382). In their view, 'The curricular history of sociology in Bangladesh shows how the sociological discourse in the country has remained ossified and ritualistic' (p. 385). They state that 'Sociology has failed to develop a creative tradition because of its imported origin and an intellectual milieu of a rentier class' (p. 377), citing Islam, 1999).

Moreover, 'Sociological discourses in Bangladesh have largely

been shaped by its peripheral socio-political structure, which has not been favourable to the discipline' (Islam & Islam, 2005, p. 386). The sociologists in the country have made little effort to 'seriously examine the lack of a viable sociological tradition' (p. 387). Karim (2014) provides an account of the evolution of anthropology in Bangladesh in relation to global links with a focus on how it changed from being a philosophical-theoretical subject to an applied one. However, his account does not address academic dependency or the captive mind.

According to Sabir (2010), 'inequalities, produced by today's global division of labor in sociology, in relations between the knowledge producing countries and the recipient countries are maintained and even exacerbated by specific features of the current division of labor in global knowledge' (p. 12). He observes a lack of productive relationships between Pakistani sociologists and their counterparts internationally, except for a brief period at the discipline's inception in the country. He asks why has sociology not grown in Pakistan, instead of remaining isolated from the knowledge production process? He examines historical and structural factors such as state policies, scarcity of resources, and the US role in introducing the discipline and the role of English to find answers. He examines Pakistani sociology's dependence on Western/American sociology (pp. 25-29). The US departure in the early 1970s led to a situation of isolation for Pakistani sociology.

Sabir (2016) examines these themes further in a recently completed research dissertation. The main research question he examines is how sociology as an institutionalized discipline in Pakistan has been shaped by different socio-political and historical contexts with a 'particular focus on the way in which conceptions of social scientific knowledge and ideology have historically been constructed, normalized and reproduced' (p. 23). The dissertation explores the process of institutionalization of sociology by viewing it principally as 'created by Pak-US foreign policies, which have impacted upon the definition and development of academic sociology and its practice in the postcolonial Pakistan' (2010, p. 23). Moreover, 'While identifying the hegemony of US sociology and its continuity in the experience of Pakistani academic sociology, it endeavors to understand the trajectory of Pak- US political relationship and knowledge as a breeding source of dependency of the captive mind of the knowledge periphery (Pakistan) on the center (US) of ideas, on the medium of ideas (e.g. journals,

conferences), on the technology of education, on financing the social research, and on educational infrastructure' (Sabir, 2016, p. 23).

Sabir's argument is that 'Sociology in Pakistan was introduced as a developmental norm of modernization project. It perpetuated the intellectual anomie by disconnecting the scholars from indigenous culture, native languages and their historical past' (p. 29). Indeed, this is an important argument that has relevance to other South Asian countries.

Reasons for the academic dependency: a summary

According to the reviewed literature, several factors stand out as contributing factors to the academic dependency in South Asian sociology. They are described below:

Historical factor: Sociology emerged in the European context and then expanded to the US. It was introduced to South Asia during the colonial period by Western academics and those who were trained in the West by using Western theories, perspectives, methods of research and resources. The discipline continued in this role until brain drain from Pakistan in the 60s and Sri Lanka in the 70s.

Teaching and Pedagogical factors: e.g. Syllabuses, textbooks:

The younger generation of sociologists continued to use 'old sociology' notes and text books in teaching almost in dogmatic fashion, in addition to   the rising cost of text books produced in Western countries. The local textbooks produced by these sociologists reproduced the old knowledge rather than creating innovative and original concepts, theories, and perspectives appropriate to the South Asian context.

Language factor: When the language of instruction changed from English to local languages, sociologists not only continued the teaching of old sociology as described above, but also being unable to connect with global sociology and its developments on account of the English language deficiency and lack of familiarity with sociological terminology. Lack of critical engagement with new materials coming from the West via journals and latest textbooks was an additional factor. The result was a continuation of imitative forms of teaching instead of critical forms.

Research factor: Instead of engaging in theory production and fresh imaginative or reflective work, sociologists embraced NGO-

funded development research and/or state-funded research oriented to national development as consultants, producing reports based on surveys whose design and purpose were developed in Europe or USA.

Institutional Factor: Sociologists look inward rather than outward in this situation, but not deep enough even in that. i.e. not looking at their own intellectual traditions. Lacking in institutional leadership and role models to inspire new generations of sociologists in intellectual work suitable for the region.

Disciplinary and Epistemological Factor: the received knowledge during the training of sociologists was largely Eurocentric. Yet the institutional and pedagogical practices in South Asian countries promoted the same as part of the colonialist-modernist agenda and this continued during the nationalist and post -nationalist phases reproducing captive minds within the discipline.

Western social science theory's irrelevance

Alatas (2006, pp. 133-135) has elaborated several aspects of Western theory's irrelevance to the Asian context by citing the following points:

Lack of Originality: the captive mind is characterized by a way of thinking dominated by Western thought. Furthermore, Asian sociologists assimilate Western knowledge uncritically. This is apparent in the way teaching and research are conducted.

Discord between assumptions and reality: e.g. misplaced abstraction, misinterpretation of data, and erroneous conception of problems. One question arising here is whether social scientists formulate their assumptions based on Western literature and theory or the empirical reality at hand?

Inapplicability: of theories, concepts or models. Here the practice of reproducing age-old theories, concepts and models, particularly in teaching without regard to their applicability, needs to be revisited and revised.

Alienation: Refers to the alienation of social sciences from their surroundings. This is a crucial factor noted by sociologists in Asia and elsewhere in the global south. Reliance on theories, concepts and methods imported from the global north/West to Asian sociology practice with no direct relevance to the context is a concern among

some sociologists in South Asia.

Redundancy: Uncritical imitation of redundant propositions. Propensity to assimilate verbal inventions, which do not represent new ideas. This is a highly regrettable outcome impacting on teaching and thwarting innovation.

Mystification: use of jargon to mystify knowledge. It does not add to knowledge. Western/English terminology used in sociology contributes to this. Finding local terms for English terms confuses students and other readers.

Mediocrity: refer to 'shallow social science that nevertheless gains a respectability in the non-Western out backs' (Alatas, 2006, p. 135). Imitative nature of sociology taught in South Asian universities contributes to lack of interest in finding concepts, theories, models and perspectives, from the local context.

The manner of academic dependency and manifold consequences of Western dominance have been further elaborated by several sociologists such as Alatas, Patel, and Connell in the following way:

1. Sociologists becoming captive minds who reproduce rather than innovate and create. 'The theory of captive mind is characterized by a way of thinking that is dominated by Western thought. The problem is not the appropriation of Western thought per se but rather the uncritical and imitative manner in which Western knowledge is assimilated' (Alatas, 2006, p. 133).

2. Poverty of concepts, theory or new methods. Lack of New knowledge discoveries and explanations for better understanding the human condition and existence.

3. Lack of fit between Western theory and non-Western realities. Irrelevance or non-applicability of Western theories, concepts and assumptions (p. 133).

4. Disenfranchisement of alternative knowledge and theory (Connell, 2007, p. xi).

5. The non-recognition of local writings as a legitimate body of sociological literature and the absence of textbooks in local languages that are not imitative of

Western theory and knowledge

6. Sociology not becoming a liberating discourse (Alatas, 2006). Instead it is maintaining elitism in one dimension and marginalizing the rest who don't fit the elitist mode on the other, e.g. regional sociologists who perform via local languages

7. Some regional sociologists with a vernacular orientation tending towards a degree of nativism i.e. uncritical use of native or nationalistic concepts and ideas in teaching

8. Focus on micro sites rather than macro links, e.g. neglect of local-global nexus in research

9. Inability to contribute to global sociology, let alone metropolitan sociology

10. Inability to contribute to public discourses on local social and other issues

11. Lack of critical engagement with the effects of modernity (Patel, 2010b).

When considering the unequal relationship between centres of social science practice and those in the global south, in particular South Asia, it is necessary to consider the changed role of the sociologist in the evolving socio-economic, political and cultural contexts.

Changed role of South Asian sociologist

Since colonisation and modernisation, the role of South Asian sociologists and anthropologists as intermediary between the global and local sociology-anthropology professions has undergone transformation, and involving local idioms, values, beliefs, customs and practices. Instead of acting as field research assistants for anthropologists interested in village studies, rural development, family, caste, land tenure, religion, rituals and belief systems in the early era, now local sociologists working in universities in the region are compelled or encouraged to function as 'consultants' for various international bodies operating in the region. Examples are the roles of development consultant, education consultant, water consultant, environment consultant, wildlife consultant, health sociology consultant, sociology of medicine consultant, or even consultant on housing and irrigation. There is a substantial difference in pay rates

between local and international consultants. The data gathered by various research projects and the reports produced serve the interests of the metropolitan based organisations that employ such consultants including some university departments located in US, UK, Canada, Australia or other European countries. Critical sociologists claim that the contribution of such consultants to 'knowledge construction' in sociology is marginal. The fact that research on knowledge construction does not attract the same remuneration as in consulting work on other topics has been noted as a causal factor for this situation.

There are numerous references to this topic in the emerging sociological literature in South Asian countries, including the work of the authors referred to in this paper. For example, Perera (2012) states that such consultants have colonised the sociology profession in Sri Lanka to such an extent that the regular conduct of sociology practice in the universities has been reduced to a routine activity without 'critical sociological imagination'. The indirect charge is that these local sociologists have sold their hearts and souls to foreign funding-research bodies. Instead they should be producing locally relevant scholarly work while training the next generation of sociologists with critical minds. However, the question here is whether we should blame individual sociologists for this situation or the system that produces such work conditions? This calls for in-depth reflection on sociology practice by the community of sociologists in the region.

Conclusion

Academic dependency and the captive mind are disturbing characteristics that are visible in the sociology practice in South Asian countries. Though these are outcomes of the colonial project, in particular the embedding of modernist frameworks of thought in sociology and other social sciences serving the interests of metropolitan powers at the time, there is no reason why we should not awaken to this reality and open our eyes not only to understand this reality but also to start a discourse on how to develop an indigenous sociology –or for that matter social sciences- that enable us to comprehend our own problems and evolve solutions. Understanding society merely for the sake of understanding is not enough in the present context where our societies, cultures and peoples face various serious socio-economic, political and cultural problems. Social scientists have an important role to play as public intellectuals, who are not diluting their status and role

with political party platforms, to speak authentically on behalf of the society, in particular of the disempowered segments without a voice.

The unequal relationship that South Asian sociologists and anthropologists have with their counterparts in Europe and USA continues to be dominated by Western epistemology, academic dependency, and practices associated with teaching, research and publication. This is not in the best interests of the South Asian academy or the students who have become the victims of a teaching and research culture caught in a dependency on Western sociological heritage and the resulting captive mind. Such a culture perpetuates Western dominance and local dependency, leaving sociology to the charges of irrelevancy. A critically reflective, well informed core group of sociologists and anthropologists from the region is required to move the discipline and its practices above this unsatisfactory situation and provide the necessary epistemological framework and a tool kit suitable for the regional context in the 21st century. Such a group can evaluate the state of sociology in South Asia in light of academic dependency and western dominance by examining the emerging literature as well as organising seminars and conferences as well as edited volumes of publications on the one hand and dialogue about the nature of a grounded sociological disciplinary framework suitable for the region that draws from local intellectual, philosophical, religious and cultural traditions. Together, these efforts can contribute to the cultivation of an 'emancipatory' sociological imagination for the benefit of the populace –not only the policy makers and governing bodies – away from the existing sterile imagination perpetuated by practitioners in the name of sociology.

In this regard, sociologists in South Asia have to make efforts to not only critically re-assess the value of sociological language coventions, terminology, theories, and methods inherited from the global north (West) but also look for alternatives while attempting to be free from being prisoners of such language and terminology etc. As Vasavi says, 'what may be possible and even more relevant is not a pure 'indigenous social science' or sociology/social anthropology but a self-conscious, sensitive, representative body of knowledge that overcomes the multiple problems associated with current social sciences, their orientation and pedagogy' (Vasavi, 2011, p. 407).

Here I need to emphasise the need for sociologists (and other social scientists) to make a significant contribution not only to the task of

understanding society and its problems but also coming up with feasible solutions based on a deep understanding of own society, economy, culture, polity, family, kinship etc (see Gamage, 2016). Continuing to study our social institutions as our Western-trained predecessors did (and some anthropologists still do) as if these are exotic phenomena, practices, norms and rituals is not suitable for the present post-colonial context, and we as sociologists and anthropologists have to be more proactive in emancipating these disciplines, their concepts, theories and methods from the Western grip and evolving our own disciplinary framework in more critical, creative, and relevant ways. In this regard, in addition to the work of sociologists such as Alatas, Connell, and Patel, Sabir etc. readers can access the work of Rosa (2014), Santos (2014), and Thakur (2015).

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