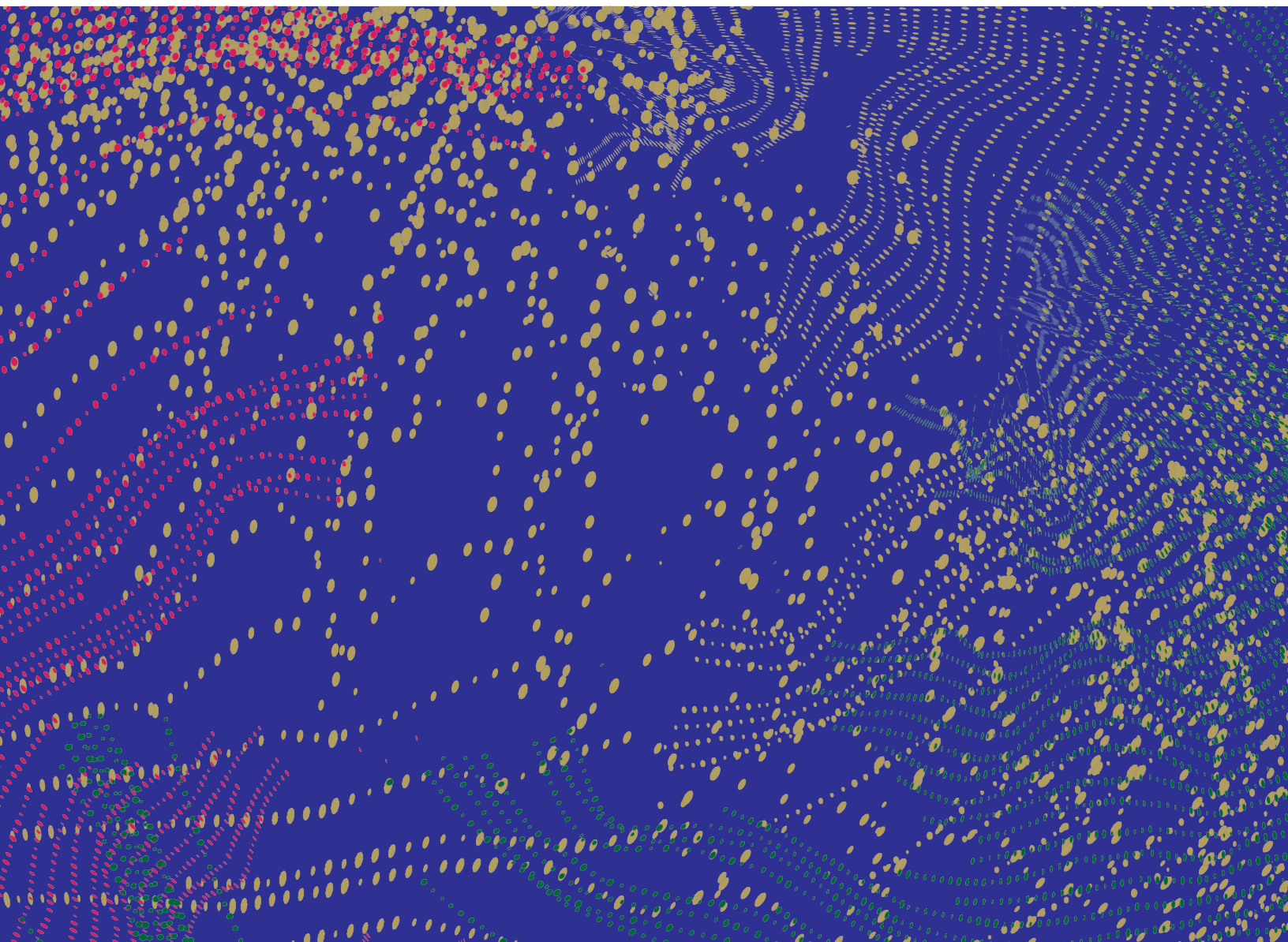


The World Humanities Report

The Multiple Habitations of the Humanities in South Asia

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The Multiple Habitations of the Humanities in South Asia

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As the World Humanities Report regional team leader for India and South Asia, I invited contributions from a range of scholars both within and outside of academia who reflect and represent the varied residences and manifestations of humanities practices in the region. The South Asia region's resulting contribution to the World Humanities Report (WHR) includes the current essay, twelve commissioned essays, and twelve video interviews. Although these essays and interviews do not comprehensively represent the state of humanities in India and South Asia, they point us toward the most compelling contours of humanities thinking and practices in the region over the past few decades and provide substantive clues about their larger formal and informal dimension in this region. The contributions are meant to give readers a broader understanding of the evolution and contemporary state of the humanities in this part of the world. As a supplement to the other contributions, this essay provides a window onto the locations, thematics, and journey of humanities as a field of cultural practice and inquiry within the context of South Asia's particular history and its politics of knowledge. Taken together, our contributions reveal the humanities in South Asia as a cluster of intellectual practices that operate as significantly *outside* as they do *inside* academic institutions. The humanities thrive within the domain of civil society, where they provide resources to interrogate inequalities, indignities, and exploitation. The humanities persist within the movements for change as well as within the everyday practices of people who struggle to make sense of the world; they do so through ideas and categories often derived from humanities work in universities. It is of particular importance that, as part of growing and clamorous democracies, young minds belonging to marginalized groups have in recent years entered public higher education institutions in large numbers—in India largely due to the affirmative action policies of the state—and these young people are challenging the terra firma on which the humanities are practiced.

In pulling together the contributions from India and South Asia, we asked the following questions: How have the humanities generated an understanding of social and cultural issues on the ground? What has been the nature of engagement between the academic humanities and society at large? How have the humanities negotiated their intrinsic value and their role in the radical

transformation of society? And how do we defend the humanities work in a society that has embraced instrumental values so fundamentally? The commissioned essays were contributed by scholars and practitioners from a wide range of academic fields such as sociology, anthropology, history, literature, literary studies, performance studies and aesthetics, environmental humanities, gender studies, and feminist studies. Some essays have been written jointly by university scholars and activists.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed several challenges to the research plan for the region. Our aspiration to include a greater portion of work from across the subcontinent faced several challenges due to stringent travel restrictions and limitations on convening scholars from across the region. As a result and due to contingency rather than intent, most of the contributions are from India, with one from Sri Lanka and another from Pakistan. The uncertainty, anxiety, and suffering brought by the pandemic, beyond the difficulties that it presented to getting our work done, also reminded us acutely of the need for the humanities to address human suffering, societal fractures, and the failures of our collective humanity. Working under the conditions of a global pandemic made us acutely aware of the important role of the humanities in an increasingly unequal world, where marginal voices struggle to make their presence felt and their voices heard.

Postcolonial Palimpsest

I am a political theorist as well as a poet and translator. The place I inhabit as a scholar and a poet lies at the intersection of politics, history, literature, and philosophy. Until I entered higher education in social sciences and the humanities, which was conducted entirely in English, I studied primarily in the Odia language (the language spoken primarily in the eastern Indian state of Odisha with a population of nearly 40 million people), but also to a lesser extent in English and Sanskrit. I continue to write poetry in Odia and to translate European languages into Odia. My rootedness in multiple linguistic, political, and disciplinary imaginaries shapes the intellectual perspective that I bring to the World Humanities Report, particularly that of decolonization.

To explore this perspective, let us consider an early twentieth-century Odia poem: Fakir Mohan Senapati's "Mu Hatabahuda" (I have returned from a

market).¹ Senapati (1843–1918) was also a novelist and one of the founders of modern Indian literature. He focused his satirical gaze on the momentous changes wrought by colonialism, and his body of work articulates a pedagogy of the ordinary that transforms the role of imagination in a colonial setting.

“Mu Hatabahuda” begins with a poet visiting a market, where he observes the buyers and sellers who have gathered. Someone is selling the newly established colonial form of legal justice, sex workers are selling their bodies, the traditional village teachers are selling their education (with little success), priests are selling skills for performing rituals, the official clerks offer their service of writing petitions to solve bureaucratic problems, and a spiritual guru is selling the name of God for a fee. A vendor is selling classical literature in Sanskrit—by Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Sriharsa²—with little success, while another shop selling the work of English poets such as Pope, Byron, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Milton has attracted a throng of young men. Elsewhere, a crowd gathers in front of the shop selling works of history, philosophy, and botany. The market in the poem is a metaphor for the process of commodification that had intensified in the colonial period. The consolidation of the British power in India required an “English” education for colonial subjects that would legitimize its sphere of operations and influence. Such an education involved the use not only of the English language but also of the epistemic power of new academic disciplines in the natural sciences and the humanities.

Our wanderer-poet needs a livelihood and decides to sell *desi* (Indian) literary works at the market. With a loan from a printer, he publishes classical Sanskrit works such as *Puranas*,³ *Itihasa* (Genealogical and historical narratives), and *Kavya* (Poetry) in Odia translation, as well as contemporary Odia poetry and novels. He makes posters to advertise his books and calls out to people to buy them, but his offerings do not appeal to the crowd, even while the English-language book stalls are crowded with buyers and struggling to keep up with demand. He then decides to give his books away for free, but that effort also fails. Dejected and disappointed, the poet shuts his shop and returns home. At a

¹ Fakir Mohan Senapati, “Mu Hatabahuda”, in *Fakir Mohan Granthabali* [Collected works of Fakir Mohan], 2nd ed. (Cuttack: Cuttack Students Store, 1963), 1:415–19. The poem was first published in his volume of poetry *Abasara Basare* [In restful days] in 1908, but the book’s introduction reveals that he wrote it around 1904–5.

² Classical Sanskrit poets who have influenced literary imagination and poetics in India for centuries.

³ Sacred writings in Sanskrit or Indian languages on Hindu mythology and folklore of varying date and origin. In the nineteenth century, many Sanskrit Purana were transcreated into Indian languages.

time when English education was spreading throughout colonial India, the poem tells a story of changing times, when English books and the education that they represent had irretrievably changed the readership for literature. It depicts a new world where an allure for novel modes of knowledge is taking root and conveys a deep anxiety about the future of Odia literature.

Senapati's poem illustrates how the colonial context created new challenges for humanistic practices in Indian languages. The instrumental value of an English education and the entrenchment of new epistemologies in the domain of university education meant that those who were writing in Indian languages had to find new forums for the circulation of their works. Even today, because higher education in India remains dominated by the English language, practitioners of humanistic writings in Indian languages have to look for different ways to disseminate their works.

As many of our contributors point out, English education created a new register of meanings for education in general and "humanistic" sensibilities in particular. The colonial condition gave rise both to new humanistic practices and to their domestication and creative use. Over time humanistic practices would become both a site of colonial domination and a site for undermining its hegemony. In place of a proto-nationalistic idiom to tell the story of his experience in the market, Senapati uses words such as *hata* (market) and *bahuda* (return)⁴ that are endowed in Odia with rich metaphorical investments hard to capture in English. The ambiguity of *hata* allows for an expansive notion of a market as encompassing the whole world, in contrast to a determinate locale or space. Similarly, *bahuda* can be viewed both as a unique event and as an extended recurrence. But they nonetheless clearly evoke how new knowledge and new modes of knowing reside in an established matrix of power and unequal relationships. Senapati's anxieties about the future of local languages and literature—their value, significance, and survival—remain acutely alive today.

When we began working on the World Humanities Report, we had to confront the unsettled category of the humanities. We realized that if we worried too much about defining the humanities in terms of their institutional forms, we would not be able to appreciate their varied manifestations in India and South Asia. In nontechnical undergraduate education in India, the humanities fall under the rubric of the "arts" as a part of the broad tripartite structure

⁴ *Bahuda* carries with it a sacred resonance as it invokes the occasion when Lord Jagannath once a year leaves his temple and returns after a fixed period of time on a chariot. *Bahuda* thus suggests a journey that embodies a life-changing experience.

of arts, science, and commerce. In research institutions, the “arts” include not only the more conventionally humanistic disciplines such as history, philosophy, and literature, but also politics, sociology, geography, and economics.

The boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities are often unclear; a few institutions group the humanities and social sciences schools as a single unit, distinct from the natural sciences and engineering.⁵ This is all to say that our regional contribution does not proceed from how “the humanities” are arrayed within universities in India and South Asia but from how the humanities are entangled within social life in this part of the world.

In India and South Asia the “humanities” are best understood as a contingent, historically shaped intellectual formation, but the fact that “humanities” is not a settled category should not prevent us from acknowledging its agency, challenges, and possibilities in the real world. We cannot restrict humanistic research and learning to academic institutions, though universities constitute a vital location for their creation, articulation, and dissemination. We must also look for the humanistic practices beyond the educational institutions in India because Indian society impinges so significantly upon them. It is clear that the most productive humanistic learning happens at the intersection of the two.

The Humanities in South Asia in Historical Perspective

In an insightful essay, historian Edward Ayers traces the humanities in North American universities as an assemblage of elements drawn from German research universities, Oxbridge tutelage, and French training for civil service.⁶ Ayers’s North American example shows how much historical contingency informs the “humanities” in a given context. From a modest beginning in elite educational institutions in the United States, the humanities disciplines expanded significantly after World War II, but only in the 1960s was there a phenomenal expansion of humanities departments in American universities in terms of enrolment, funding, and opportunities for employment and mobility. According to Ayers, this version of the humanities—an aggregation of disciplines in universities within the context of the growing needs of capitalism—is fundamentally different from *studia humanitatis*, the early modern articulation

⁵ Most Indian Institutes of Technologies (IITs) contain schools of humanities and social sciences.

⁶ Edward L. Ayers, “Where the Humanities Live,” *Daedalus* 138, no. 1 (2009): 24–34.

of humanities practiced in the Italian universities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

The study of languages, literature, philosophy, astronomy, logic, and religion was long practiced in ancient and medieval educational centers in South Asia, but the academic humanities of today took root much more recently, during the colonial period. As Gauri Viswanathan has persuasively argued, in the early part of the nineteenth century, the introduction of literary education was meant to inculcate moral values in Indian elites so that they could better appreciate not only English literature but their own literature as well.⁷ She argues that the function of the colonial literature curriculum was predominantly religious and moral and responded to an imagined fear among the British of disorder and rebellion by disgruntled natives. In time, this perspective gave way to new thinking on education not as a site of moral refurbishment but as an avenue for preparing Indians to act as valuable cogs in the machinery of the colonial state. For their part, Indian elites saw in university education the possibility of economic mobility and of enhanced social status, but their aspirations were not fully realized, leading to disaffection. The importance of liberty, self-determination, and dignity articulated through the colonial curriculum sounded hollow and vacuous and ran up against the realities of the colonial condition and subjects.⁸ Humanistic education could not mask the nature of colonial rule.

In nineteenth-century debates over education in the region, British historian and statesman Thomas B. Macaulay's 1835 "Minute on Education" was seen as a crucial turning point both in terms of policy and vision. In this memorandum, Macaulay had imagined education in India and South Asia with utilitarian concerns and instrumental values. He and his supporters advocated for the British East India Company to provide resources "for the revival and promotion of literature, and the encouragement of the learned natives of India, and for the introduction and promotion of a knowledge of the sciences among the inhabitants of the British territories."⁹ Through the introduction of English as a medium of knowledge, he argued, the natives could be taught rationality, science, morality, and civilization. This education would support the company's

⁷ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

⁸ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Mehta's book provides a theoretical account of the relationship between liberal imagination and the "unfamiliar."

⁹ "Macaulay's Minute on Education, February 2, 1835," accessed February 29, 2024, <http://home.iitk.ac.in/~hcverma/Article/Macaulay-Minutes.pdf>.

policy of “improving” the quality of the Indian elites and their successful incorporation into an emerging mode of colonial governance. Macaulay believed neither Sanskrit nor Arabic could serve as effective instruments for teaching natural and moral philosophy to Indian subjects; only English could. Furthermore, Macaulay argued that the Indian elites were in favor of “English” education. English was more than a medium of instruction. It was also a mode of learning, a symbol of a superior, modern world of communication, a community of practice, a language of power, and an enhancer of status. As Partha Chatterjee points out in his video interview included here as part of the World Humanities Report,¹⁰ these contrasting attitudes toward classical languages led to the ironic situation where the study of English language and literature in Indian universities predated the same at Cambridge and Oxford. Even though English education in nineteenth-century India was limited in terms of the number of institutions where it was taught and the number of students it reached, its ideological impact was decisive in public culture and civic affairs. Meanwhile, Indian and South Asian languages were construed merely as conduits for diffusing European knowledge among colonial subjects. Colonial policymakers scarcely entertained a role for Indian languages in the production of knowledge about the world.

In 1854 recommendations of the president of the Board of Control, East India Company Charles Wood to Lord Dalhousie, then the Governor General of India, created further momentum for English education in India. According to Wood’s dispatch, the goal of higher education was the “diffusion of the Arts, Science, Philosophy and Literature of Europe.” He also advocated the use of Indian languages in primary and secondary schools for the purpose of disseminating European knowledge. On the basis of Wood’s recommendations, the Court of Directors of the East India Company decided that “the time has arrived for the establishment of universities in India which might encourage a regular and liberal course of education by conferring academic degrees as evidence of attainment in the different branches of Arts and Sciences.”¹¹ Although universities were established in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras in 1857, their functions were initially limited to holding examinations, conferring degrees, and

¹⁰ World Humanities Report India/South Asia Conversations, “Partha Chatterjee,” uploaded July 26, 2023, YouTube video, 28:34, <https://youtu.be/4IAgGo2RwjM?si=3MNKSHdg2krAvNIP>.

¹¹ Quote in *The Report of the University Education Commission (December 1948–August 1949)* (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 1962), 1:15.

regulating the affiliated educational institutions.¹² Only later, in the twentieth century, would universities in India acquire the familiar look of modern universities—institutions devoted to advanced teaching and research. University education elsewhere in colonial India was limited. In the early twentieth century, there were only 126 affiliated colleges throughout British India.¹³

In conventional analyses of humanities practices in Indian universities, knowledge articulated in Indian languages is rarely considered. Nonetheless, as historian Narendra Krishna Sinha observed decades ago about Bengal: “the vernaculars did not pine and shrivel under the cold breath of Macaulay’s rhetoric. The ardor for English education pushed vernaculars into the background in the colleges. But there was, fortunately for Bengal, a succession of eminent men who could refine the Bengali language, enrich it and make it a fit vehicle for conveying new knowledge with translations, adaptations and epitomes.”¹⁴ Sinha made this comment as the study of Indian languages and literature was introduced into the curriculum at the University of Calcutta. In the 1920s Rabindranath Tagore founded Visva-Bharati, an educational institution that emphasized the performing arts, comparative literature and religion, and the study of languages (Indian, Asian, and European). The school created new possibilities for humanistic learning and research in India.¹⁵ The resistance to English was not peculiar to one province of colonial India, but it remains a largely unexplored research area. Essays by J. Devika, Badri Narayan, and Tahir Kamran, included as part of the World Humanities Report, reflect on

¹² For their histories see Pramathnath Banerjee et al. eds., *Hundred Years of the University of Calcutta: A History of the University issued in the commemoration of the Centenary Celebrations* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1957); S. R. Dongerkery, ed., *A History of the University of Bombay (1857–1957)* (Bombay: Bombay University Press, 1957); *History of Higher Education in South India*, vol. 1, *University of Madras (1857–1957)* (Madras: Associated Printers, 1957).

¹³ *The Report of the University Education Commission*, 19.

¹⁴ Narendra Krishna Sinha, “Beginning of Western Education,” in Banerjee et al., *Hundred Years of the University of Calcutta*, 24.

¹⁵ For a history of Visva-Bharati and its emphasis on humanities education, see Swati Ganguly, *Tagore’s University: A History of Visva-Bharati 1921–1961* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2022). See also the video conversation between Baidik Bhattacharya and Prathama Banerjee, part of the World Humanities Report, where they discuss the tradition of humanities education represented by Visva-Bharati. World Humanities Report India/South Asia Conversations, “Baidik Bhattacharya and Prathama Banerjee,” uploaded July 26, 2023, YouTube video, 27:32, <https://youtu.be/7w-sbsOqiVo?si=BvMilfi7WJeeXE61>.

articulations of the humanities in South Asian languages.¹⁶ Further research would do justice to the multilingual worlds of India and South Asia.

In 1948, soon after Indian independence, the first University Education Commission was established with a mandate “to report on Indian university education and suggest improvements and extensions that may be desirable to suit present and future requirements of the country.”¹⁷ The commission sought to recast the relationship between colonial-era universities and those of a newly established nation-state. Led by S. Radhakrishnan, then a professor of Eastern religions and ethics at the University of Oxford, the ten-member commission included many eminent academics and consulted with leaders in the education sector and prominent intellectuals throughout India. The commission conceptualized higher education as an instrument for preparing citizens for politics, administration, professions, industry, and commerce and as a site for articulating and fostering the vision and values of the new nation-state. In its report, the commission wrote:

We have [post-Independence] a wider conception of the duties and responsibilities of universities. They have to provide leadership in politics and administration, the professions, industry, and commerce. They have to meet the increasing demand for every type of higher education, literary and scientific, technical, and professional. They must enable the country to attain in as short a time as possible, freedom from want, disease and ignorance, by the application and development of scientific and technical knowledge. . . . It is for the universities to create knowledge and train minds who would bring together the two, material resources and human energies. If our

¹⁶ Devika’s essay deals with the humanistic practices in Malayalam (a language largely spoken in the Indian state of Kerala), Narayan’s with Hindi (a language spoken in several north Indian states including Uttar Pradesh), and Kamran’s with Punjabi in Pakistan. J. Devika, *Beyond Aesthetic Education: The Malayali Engagement with the Humanities* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022); Badri Narayan, *Dalit Ideas: The Politics of Knowledge in North India* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022); Tahir Kamran, *The Humanities in Pakistan (1990–2020)* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022). Also watch Partha Chatterjee’s and Franson Manjali’s videos produced as a part of the report. World Humanities Report India/South Asia Conversations, “Partha Chatterjee,” YouTube video; World Humanities Report India/South Asia Conversations, “Franson Manjali,” uploaded July 26, 2023, YouTube video, 25:41, https://youtu.be/oyrWLApuQrg?si=FLAZCrSK_457E_-3.

¹⁷ *The Report of the University Education Commission (December 1948–August 1949)*, vol. 1 (Ministry of Education, Government of India, reprint 1962), 1. The first edition of the report was published in 1950.

living standards are to be raised, a radical change of spirit is essential. . . . If India is to confront the confusion of our time, she must turn for guidance not to those who are lost in the mere exigencies of the passing hour, but to her men of letters and men of science, to her poets and artists, to her discoverers and inventors. These intellectual pioneers of civilizations are to be found and trained in the universities which are the sanctuaries of the inner life of the nation.¹⁸

The objective of education, according to the commission, is to creatively combine reflective, active, and emotional dimensions of life and to weave cognition, feeling, will, and nature as well as society and values into the domain of learning. Its authors recognized that modern India must treat education not as a matter of privilege but as an inalienable right. For this reason, issues of access, equality, and promoting fraternity are explicitly articulated in the report. Humanities education, in particular, was part of an integral mode of learning: it would “enable man to understand his inner aspirations and ideals. The study of the language and the literature of our mother tongue should occupy the first place in general education. Language incarnates the genius of the people which has fashioned it. . . . We get into the spirit of our people by acquiring control over the language. . . . If literature quickens and enlarges human spirit, music and painting help educate our emotions and impart a certain grace in living.”¹⁹

The humanities were central to the report’s vision. The commission advocated an integrated liberal education in which natural science, arts, and the humanities creatively interact and influence each other: “General education in Humanities should aim to give each a substantial introduction to each of the major disciplines included in the liberal tradition.” It defined liberal education as an education that should “free us from the shackles of ignorance, prejudice, and unfounded belief. If we are incapable of achieving the good life, it is due to faults in our inward being, to the darkness in us. The process of education is the slow conquering of this darkness.”²⁰ Through a connected curriculum, the report pointed out, the relationship between the sciences and the humanities had to be established and fostered. Its authors saw such a general, holistic education as an antidote to “extreme specialization” in higher education. The humanities’

¹⁸ *Report of the University Education Commission*, 28–29.

¹⁹ *Report of the University Education Commission*, 34.

²⁰ *Report of the University Education Commission*, 109, 43.

central importance can also be seen in the report's regret that science education would be neglected due to the unavailability of economic resources.

This first University Education Commission report established an idiom through which the state of higher education and its problems would be understood. Its articulation of a vision for education was bold and transformative. It saw the pressing needs of a society ravaged by centuries of colonial rule, but its instrumentality was exceptionally broad, flexible, and uplifting. Like many before them, the architects of the report understood the importance of education not only in the making of good citizens but also in the fashioning of creative and thinking individuals who, in turn, would shape the future of the nation.

Within two decades of the report's publication, the Indian state and policymakers produced a second report, which modified their view of the purpose of university education.²¹ In this second report India's economic development and national integration became the key goals of university education. The study of science and technical proficiency took center stage, and, for the first time, universities were seen primarily as sites for producing human resources.²² The urgency of economic development and modernization, quite predictably, gave education a narrow, instrumental hue. According to the diagnosis of the second University Education Commission report, the existing system of education was "largely unrelated to life, and there is a wide gulf between its contents and purposes and the concerns of national development." For India to embark upon rapid economic development, its education "must be related to productivity."²³ This "vocationalization" of education became a key strategy in the larger development agenda for the new nation.

The absence of meaningful discussion on the role of humanities and social sciences in this second report is striking. When the humanities and social sciences are mentioned, they are as if afterthoughts, and when questions of value, spirit, and culture surface in the report, the connections between them and humanities and social sciences are never made. The liberating power of science to generate a "scientific temper," rationality, and productivity is hailed as a cardinal force in shaping society. The report calls for enhancing the role of Indian languages in higher education, but even here the conception of language and its

²¹ *Education and National Development, Report of the Education Commission, 1964–1966* (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 1966).

²² Indeed, in 1985 the Ministry of Education changed its name to the Ministry of Human Resource Development. In 2020, for various political and historical reasons, the name was changed back to the Ministry of Education.

²³ *Education and National Development*, 8.

role are, at best, perfunctory. Terms such as “culture,” “heritage,” “spirituality,” “fostering democratic values,” and “promoting international understanding” appear as isolated elements outside the central vision of the report. In the formal educational policy adopted by the Indian government following the report, arguably the first major education policy in modern India, concern for developing the humanities and social sciences was conspicuous only by its absence.²⁴ The perceived purpose of higher education, as well as the idea of university, had shrunk.

For several decades now, reports dealing with university education in India as well as in other South Asian countries lament the fragmentation of knowledge in higher education.²⁵ India paid a heavy price for moving away from the spirit of the first commission report and for adopting a “technocratic” attitude, with insufficient attention to the role of the humanities and social sciences in its higher education. The creation of stand-alone professional institutions such as engineering, law, medicine, and management schools outside the ambit of universities aggravated this problem. When these institutions remain within an ecosystem of a university with multiple academic disciplines, the possibilities for interaction with the humanities and social sciences are higher. Otherwise, they remain as islands of learning with little connection to other modes of knowing and research. The 2008 report by the Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education, known as the Yash Pal Report, acknowledged the problem: “We are struck by the fact that over the years we have followed policies of fragmenting our educational enterprise into

²⁴ *National Education Policy* (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 1968), <http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/351/1/Policy-National%20Policy%20of%20Education%201968.pdf>.

²⁵ See *Report of the Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education*, 2008, <https://www.aicte-india.org/downloads/Yashpal-committee-report.pdf>; *National Knowledge Commission Report to the Nation, 2006–2009* (Government of India, 2009), <https://www.aicte-india.org/downloads/nkc.pdf>; and *National Education Policy, 2020* (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020), https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf. This is not a problem confined to India alone. See also WHR essays by Tahir Kamran dealing with Pakistan and Farzana Haniffa with Sri Lanka, which highlight similar concerns in those countries. Kamran, *The Humanities in Pakistan (1990–2020)*; Farzana Haniffa, *Understanding the Muslim Predicament in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Contribution of the Social Sciences and Humanities* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

cubicles . . . and we have tended to imprison disciplinary studies in opaque walls. This has restricted flights of imagination and limited our creativity.”²⁶

The story of fragmentation of knowledge is a recurring theme in the higher education reports India produced since independence. If the 1948 report presented the issue as something a university education must try to overcome or guard against, the later reports speak of it as a malaise that has entrenched itself in India’s higher education. Specialization of knowledge had long been seen as necessary but needing to be tempered by fostering meaningful exchanges between academic disciplines and modes of knowing and thinking. It also had to be refracted through values, aesthetics, and ethics. Some reports sought to transform India’s higher education so that it could better connect to people’s lives, needs, and national aspirations, but at the heart of these narratives lies a paradox that is not easy to overcome. Specialized education (particularly technical, scientific, and vocational) is necessary to realize the dreams of India’s modernization, but it also creates fragmentation and disunity in thinking and imagination. The fates of humanities and social sciences are precariously interwoven into this narrative. The unevenness of academic disciplines within higher education was and is acknowledged, but no concrete pathways were suggested to change it in meaningful ways. We need to look at the state of humanities in India and examine the efficacy of the existing narratives within this discursive space.

The National Education Policy (NEP), adopted in 2022, once again speaks of the need for “multidisciplinary” (or “holistic”) higher education but does so in highly instrumental and utilitarian terms. The term “multidisciplinary education” is not fully defined in the report except to point out the undesirability of superspecialization in the early stages of a student’s higher education. According to the report, one of the objectives of its proposed multidisciplinary education and research is to integrate the humanities and arts with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics: “a holistic and multidisciplinary education would aim to develop all capabilities of human beings—intellectual,

²⁶ Yash Pal (1926–2017), an eminent Indian scientist and educator, chaired the committee. This was a *National Report*, commissioned by the Government of India. *Report of the Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education*, 2–3. Also see the video conversation of A. R. Venkatachalapathy on the importance of humanities in our time that is dominated by digital technology and intense urbanization. World Humanities Report India/South Asia Conversations, “A. R. Venkatachalapathy,” uploaded July 26, 2023, YouTube video, 19:44, <https://youtu.be/ho8bpvxzbVE?si=kcIb3LpbabBDy1qy>. In their video conversation Prathama Banerjee talks of the “return of the humanities moment” in India since the turn of the present century. World Humanities Report India/South Asia Conversations, “Baidik Bhattacharya and Prathama Banerjee.”

aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral—in an integrated manner.” This integration can be achieved by flexible curricular structures with a creative combination of disciplines and research-based specializations. Like previous reports, the NEP 2020 emphasizes value-based education that includes the “development of humanistic, ethical, Constitutional, and universal human values of truth . . . , righteous conduct . . . , peace (*shanti*), love . . . , nonviolence.”²⁷ Except for establishing new model public universities for holistic and multidisciplinary education on par with the existing best institutions in India, the NEP 2020 report neglects to specify distinct pathways for achieving the outlined objectives.

Although the NEP 2020 also advocates for bringing Indian languages into higher education as a medium of instruction and research and sees fostering national culture as an important objective of higher education, its report lacks any serious analysis of the asymmetric treatment of the technological sciences, natural sciences, the humanities, and social sciences within higher education. It—and other such government documents—gives the impression that all disciplines are located on an even playing field, equitably supported,²⁸ with equal shares of societal approval and esteem, but that is not the case at all. The academic humanities in India suffer from a peculiar powerlessness that stems from the inability of policymakers to grasp how the humanities contribute to life and society in concrete ways. The rhetoric of unity of knowledge and integral education exists in policy documents, but in practice nothing changes on the ground in terms of supporting humanistic learning or addressing their poor status in universities. Despite their ongoing presence in universities, the humanities’ role and significance are either unrecognized or underappreciated. To see the humanities merely as a means of socialization of individuals into culture ignores its capacity to nurture critical attitudes toward the world that we inhabit. A lack of interest in critical debate about the role of humanities within the academic and policy circles has exacerbated this powerlessness over decades, and this lack of due attention has pushed practitioners of the humanities to look outside of academia for more meaningful opportunities in government bureaucracy, industries, digital and print media, and so forth. The emergence of

²⁷ *National Education Policy, 2020*, 36, 38.

²⁸ The issue of uneven budgetary allocation to different academic disciplines is discussed later in this essay.

private universities offering liberal arts education in India has not improved the humanities' predicament much because they are small, expensive, and elitist.

At the same time, in universities, primarily public ones, India's youth belonging to socially and economically marginalized communities are struggling to use the critical resources that the humanities and social sciences provide to launch a critique of injustices, inequality, and violence.²⁹ Their creative and strategic use of the humanities to improve their life chances and to inform and enhance their struggles highlights the potential of humanistic learning in India. Essays included here describe how the humanities are used as resources for fighting for social justice in the region: essays by Badri Narayan on Dalit chapbooks in Hindi, Farzana Haniffa on the Muslims in Sri Lanka, Brahma Prakash on performativity of subaltern grassroots mobilizers, Mosarrap Khan on minority fiction in the region, Nirmal Selvamony on the ecological imagination, V. Geetha on the mobilization of the humanities in the fight for equality, Tejaswini Madabhushi and Gitanjali Joshua on contemporary feminism in India, Sujatha Subramanian on the interface between digital technology and feminist and anticaste activism, J. Devika's on the mobilization of feminist ideas in Malayalam (an Indian language of the state of Kerala), and Karen Gabriel and Prem Kumar Vijayan on unpacking patriarchies in India.³⁰ This enabling side of the humanities raises hope even in these dismal times, and the WHR report

²⁹ For the changing nature of the public universities, see Nivedita Menon, "The University as Utopia," *Critical Times* 2, no. 1 (2019): 85–105.

³⁰ Narayan, *Dalit Ideas: The Politics of Knowledge in North India*; Haniffa, *Understanding the Muslim Predicament in Contemporary Sri Lanka*; Brahma Prakash, *Performers Meet the Humanities: Underground Activists Shaping the Overground Humanities in India* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023); Mosarrap Hossain Khan, *Humanities Practices and Voices at the Margins: National Consciousness and the Crisis of Belonging in Indian Anglophone Muslim Novels* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022); Nirmal Selvamony, *The Ecohumanities in India, 1980–2020* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022); V. Geetha, V. Senthilselvan, and Senthilir Sivalingam, *From Theology to the Arts: Dalit Resistance Culture in Tamil Nadu* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022); Gitanjali Joshua and Tejaswini Madabhushi, *From the "Indian Women's Movement" to "Intersectional Feminists": Humanities Categories in Indian Feminism* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022); Sujatha Subramanian, *Critical Thought in the Time of Digital Technology: The Case of Feminist and Anticaste Activism on Social Media* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022); Devika, *Beyond Aesthetic Education*; Karen Gabriel and Prem Kumar Vijayan, *Unpacking Patriarchies: Feminism and the Humanities in India* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022).

for India/South Asia made a deliberate choice to focus on the enabling aspects of the humanities in the region.

The Idiom of “Crisis”

Laments about the precariousness of the humanities, articulated within an idiom of “crisis,” have become commonplace. The scarcity of funds, lack of governmental commitment, and indifference of economic elites and the larger society are all pointed to as evidence of crisis.³¹ Defenders of the humanities counter this discourse with arguments about the need for and desirability of the humanities disciplines. They argue that the humanities are indispensable for an open and democratic society and that by nurturing a critical gaze on social and political practices the humanities support and sustain a better world. It is telling, however, that these narratives of crisis emanate largely from scholars and practitioners within the institutions of national repute and not from the government. None of the major policy documents from the Indian government refer to a “crisis” in the humanities in India. In fact, these reports contain little, if any, specific, detailed discussion about humanistic learning in the country. Without detailed discussions about the status of the humanities, nothing meaningful can be done to strengthen their presence in the sphere of higher education in India. No adequate discussion of the humanities in India can occur without a consideration of the larger landscape of higher education in India and of the general crisis of education in India.

Let us look at the landscape of higher education in India to better understand the status of the humanities in India. In 2021–22 the gross enrolment ratio (GER)—the percentage of people in India enrolled in higher education between the ages of 18 and 23—was 28.4 percent across all disciplines.³² Although the absolute number of students in higher education in India was large (approximately 40 million to 43 million), the numbers were relatively small as a proportion of the population. In 2017–18 the GER for India was 25.8 percent.³³ The comparable figure for Germany that year was 70.3 percent, 88.2 percent for the

³¹ Mrinal Miri, ed., *The Place of Humanities in Our Universities* (London: Routledge, 2018). See also, Sundar Sarukkai, “Location of Humanities,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and Middle East*, 37, no. 1 (2017): 151–61; India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore, *Arts and Humanities Research Mapping, India*, report prepared for the Research Councils UK, June 2010.

³² *All India Survey on Higher Education (2021–22)* (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2023), <https://aishe.gov.in/aishe/viewDocument.action?documentId=353>.

³³ *All India Survey on Higher Education (2017–18)* (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2018), <https://aishe.gov.in/aishe/viewDocument.action?documentId=245>.

United States, 49.1 percent for China, and 60.6 percent for the United Kingdom.³⁴ The eligibility enrolment ratio (EER)—the percentage of people who have at least finished secondary school and are eligible for college education—in 2019–20 was 64.9 percent in India, but 91.2 percent in Germany, 93.5 percent in the United States, and 72.9 percent in China.³⁵

In 2019–20 India’s higher education had a total enrolment of 38.5 million students, with 32.7 percent of them enrolled in arts, humanities, and social sciences, followed by the sciences with 16 percent, commerce with nearly 15 percent, and engineering and technology with 12.6 percent. Tuition fees in professional undergraduate courses such as engineering, law, and business administration, just to mention a few, are well above the fees for doing a course in the humanities or social sciences, which may explain the higher number of students choosing the humanities. Enrolment criteria for undergraduate degrees in humanities and social sciences tend to have a lower threshold than engineering and other technical disciplines. The numbers of students engaged in graduate and postgraduate studies tell a different story, however: the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report shows that at the master’s level most students are enrolled in the social science stream, with sciences in second place.³⁶ A mere 0.5 percent of the enrolled students go on to study at the doctoral level, and, among those who do, most pursue engineering and technology or sciences. These figures reflect the miniscule level of investment in humanities and social sciences research.

Beyond quantity, the *quality* of humanities education leaves much to be desired. Facilities, funding for research, and the quality of faculty are far from adequate. In the year 2021–22, only 2.67 percent of total government expenditure was allocated for education.³⁷ Of this allocation, just 41 percent was

³⁴ These data are taken from All India Survey on Higher Education, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

³⁵ Kritika Sharma, “Study Shows How India’s Higher Education Enrollment Can Jump to 65% from 27%,” June 15, 2020, *The Print*, <https://theprint.in/india/education/study-shows-how-indias-higher-education-enrollment-can-jump-to-65-from-27/441582/>.

³⁶ *All India Survey on Higher Education (2021–22)*. Unfortunately, the enrollment data for the humanities at the postgraduate level are not available separately as they are clubbed within the category of social science.

³⁷ Since 2015, overall national allocation toward education has been between 2.8 and 2.9 percent of the national GDP. *Demand for Grants 2023–24 Analysis* (New Delhi: Institute for Policy Research Studies, 2023), https://prsindia.org/files/budget/budget_parliament/2023/DFG_2023-24_Analysis_Education.pdf.

earmarked for higher education.³⁸ Although it is difficult to obtain disaggregated data on social sciences and humanities spending, according to one estimate from 2017–18, it is likely to be significantly less than 0.6 percent of the GDP.³⁹ Even if this data were challenged, there can be little doubt that India is yet to achieve its aspirational spending of 6 percent of the GDP⁴⁰ on education and that spending on the humanities and social sciences continues to remain very low.

Perhaps an even greater crisis is one of original thinking and a poverty of imagination. The humanities and social sciences at all levels require deep and critical engagement, but for many students having to study the humanities and social sciences in English is an alienating experience. In India and South Asia, the dominance of English in higher education remains a vexing issue. English fosters greater international collaboration and exchange among scholars, and it facilitates a greater flow of ideas, discourses, and paradigms across the humanistic disciplines. But it comes with a price. It makes humanistic education exclusionary and prevents many young people, otherwise bright and motivated, from taking an active part in creating new and critical knowledge in different academic disciplines. Reflecting on this problem as far back as 1891, Gooroodas Banerjee, the first Indian vice chancellor of the University of Calcutta, said, “one great reason why our university education fails to awaken much original thinking is that it is imparted through the medium of a difficult foreign language, the genius of which is so widely different from that of our own.”⁴¹ And even though over the years educational policies at the national level emphasize the need for more higher education institutions to “offer a medium of instruction or programmes in local/Indian languages,”⁴² little was done to make this happen. The resulting derivative nature of intellectual discourse remains a great impediment for the deepening of humanities practices in India and South Asia.

³⁸ *Demand for Grants 2021–22 Analysis* (New Delhi: Institute for Policy Research Studies, 2021), <https://prsindia.org/budgets/parliament/demand-for-grants-2021-22-analysis-education>.

³⁹ Personal communication with director of the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, New Delhi, September 17, 2021.

⁴⁰ In 1966 the Education Commission, mentioned earlier, calculated this aspirational benchmark figure of 6 percent of public expenditure to be on education as a proportion of the country’s GDP. This was incorporated into the National Education Policy of 1968. Since then, this number remains a measure to figure out how much India has done in terms of its spending on education.

⁴¹ Nihar Ranjan Ray, “Formative Years (1857–1882),” in Banerjee, *Hundred Years of the University of Calcutta*, 142.

⁴² The latest example is the *National Education Policy 2020*, 34.

Nearly ninety years ago, K. C. Bhattacharya called for *swaraj* (self-rule) in Indian thought,⁴³ highlighting the need for autonomy and independence from Western thought in Indian education. Once ideas from the West were subjected to scrutiny, Bhattacharya argued, scholars felt liberated. That is what he meant by “*swaraj* in ideas.” He did not view the politics of knowledge in binary terms as a battle between the West and India. Rather, he advocated for a critical epistemic encounter between the two. The urgent need for the “decolonization” of the humanities and for greater South-South conversation among scholars continues.⁴⁴

Other Habitations of the Humanities

In sum, we can say that the crisis of humanities education and research in India is a crisis of imagination, funding, language, location, and access. However, as the South Asian contributions to the World Humanities Report show, the ways of knowing and modes of thinking of the humanities are not confined to academic research institutions, colleges, and universities. The practices of the humanities are dynamic and active well beyond universities and formal institutions but especially at the boundaries between educational institutions and society. In particular, our contributors show how important the role of educated young people from marginalized groups has been in fostering exchange between educational institutions and the wider society, as well as how social movements have sharpened the questions and debates taking place within academic institutions. Whether it is feminist groups, grassroots activists, or Dalit intellectuals, these civil society groups together play an important role in keeping humanities practices open and socially transformative. Sometimes these groups are the able and effective translators of ideas that academicians generate in universities. At other times, they hold up a mirror to the educational

⁴³ K. C. Bhattacharya, “*Swaraj* in Ideas,” *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1954): 103–14. The essay originated as a lecture he delivered in 1931.

⁴⁴ The video conversation between Baidik Bhattacharya and Prathama Banerjee highlights these points. World Humanities Report India/South Asia Conversations, “Baidik Bhattacharya and Prathama Banerjee.” Unfortunately, there are today few experiments into humanistic learning as the cultivation of arts, aesthetic sensibilities, and critical thinking of the kind done in Visva-Bharati in the early part of the twentieth century.

institutions with a critical voice. The collected essays and interviews identify and describe the multiple habitations for the humanities in this part of the world.

The contributions assembled here focus on the efficacy of the humanities practices and their modes of knowing even as they negotiate the contradictions of societies. As they investigate and analyze the contradictions, the scholars and the activist intellectuals straddle multiple modes of knowing and domains of several academic disciplines. These essays show how the humanities in India have enabled us not only to make the hidden processes of marginality, exploitation, and indignities more visible but also to provide alternative methods to apprehend their complexities. Karen Gabriel and Prem Kumar Vijayan highlight the role of the humanities in understanding multiple caste-laden patriarchies; Tejaswani Madabhushi and Gitanjali Joshua demonstrate how humanities categories have mediated feminist movements and discourses in India. Farzana Haniffa outlines the role of humanities in understanding a significant facet of the “minority question” in Sri Lanka, and Mosarrap Khan analyzes the antinomies of belonging within Indian Anglophone Muslim fiction. While Badri Narayan’s contribution articulates the ways in which humanities make their presence visible in popular Dalit writings in northern India, Sujatha Subramanian’s essay throws light on feminist and anticaste activists’ use of digital technology in articulating their understanding of the “social.” V. Geetha and colleagues make a strong plea for taking the creative work of Dalits in public and cultural spaces seriously as they, like academic knowledge, provide a way of understanding society and Dalit subjectivities. Tahir Kamran’s and Brahma Prakash’s essays, in their own ways, draw our attention to the imbrication of the local, national, and the global. Nirmal Selvamony’s essay captures the specificities of the ways the humanities frame the issues of environment, interconnected habitats, and their ethical impingements. Safwan Amir provides us with a glimpse into the world of independent publishing and the vital role that feminist and Dalit publishers in the region play in disseminating humanities knowledge as well as the opportunities they present for new articulations to circulate. Research and practice of the humanities in Indian languages are often poorly understood and rarely included in the English-dominated higher education in India. South Asia is a land of many languages. For the WHR, J. Devika’s essay on the humanities in Malayalam provides an entry point into this vital world of thinking and research. In most of these contributions, the practices of humanities are not confined to academia or to academicians. The practices of the humanities often exceed their academic form in terms of their modes

of knowing and their outreach, and they are best captured and understood within this varied flow.

Way Forward

Together, the essays and video conversations collected as part of the World Humanities Report India/South Asia document the enabling role of the humanities in excavating and explaining the myriad contradictions and “dissensus” within Indian and South Asian society. In light of the work that our South Asian team did together, I offer the following modest suggestions for the strengthening and improvement of the humanities in India. The suggestions are broad and are in the realm of ideas and directions.

- National and state governments urgently need to pay careful attention to the role the humanities should play in holistic, multidisciplinary education in the region. Such attention must carefully analyze the current state of the humanities in higher education and find concrete pathways to strengthen them. Thus far, no government report exists on the state of humanities in the country.
- In order to appreciate the critical role of the humanities in shaping our values, attitudes, and ways of thinking, the humanities need greater integration into the curriculum of secondary education. Instead of having students choose between the arts, science, and commerce streams as early as their higher secondary school level, the humanities should be integrated more purposively, not set off as a separate stream, but woven into the broader curriculum as a distinct mode of knowledge. This would require a major rethinking in the realm of higher secondary education.
- The quality of humanities teaching and research remains very uneven in India. Investments should be made to improve humanities teaching and research, which would in turn develop greater legitimacy for the humanities throughout society.
- The allocation of financial resources must be enhanced to match the need for strengthening and integrating the humanities into higher education.
- Concerted cooperative efforts are needed among universities, government, civil society, and private funders to invest in humanities teaching and research.
- Focused efforts are needed to produce humanities and social science knowledge in Indian languages. This requires more than changing the

medium of instruction in higher education; it also requires greater investment in research and knowledge production conducted in regional languages.

- Massive technological changes and the spread of the “digital” have created new possibilities for the learning of humanities in various parts of the world. These changes have enhanced student access to intellectual resources, but they also contain the possibilities of reinforcing existing social inequalities and divisions. Significant government efforts are needed to promote the use of digital technologies and platforms to enlarge the scope of the humanities and make them relevant for society and cultural transformation.

In Closing

Reflections on the humanities are not mere intellectual exercises. They are riddled with institutional puzzles, sociological conundrums, and ontological questions. If we return to Senapati’s poet-wanderer and imagine him in a “marketplace” of education today, what would he see? The proliferation of online courses, digital platforms selling degrees and diplomas, private universities grappling with questions of knowledge and profit, and a neoliberal economic order that reduces knowledge to its instrumental value. Weakness in our collective will to make hard choices in an unequal world. The retreat of the idea of the university as the locus of enlightenment and rationality, a place for sustaining national culture, and an avenue for nurturing critical minds. A hyper-transactional and financialized world that devalues the humanities. A world riddled with ecological imbalances. How would he regard the vexing questions of the day such as what it means to be human today and on what foundations the humanities should rest? Will the questions of our time be best articulated and comprehended within the frameworks offered by the humanities? How would he deal with the erasures caused by the dominance of English in higher education spheres? Will the critique of the present be trapped in atavistic and hyper-nationalistic imaginaries? Finally, how would the poet plan his return from the market to his home? Once home, what new thoughts will grip his imagination?

We will wait to hear the story again.

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