Introduction

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India has just passed the 75th year of its birth as a republic. We see this as an occasion to take stock of how the social science and the humanities disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary fields, have evolved in India, and where we can and should go from here. This volume brings together scholars trained in different disciplines reflecting on how India—and the generic political form of the nation—has figured as an object of knowledge and a site of critical reflection in the last hundred years or so. The idea is to use the nation both as a frame and an object of critique—to explore how disciplines evolve within this frame while disassembling and reassembling the nation itself. We believe that for Indian academics, this might be the most fruitful public intervention they can make in the time of state celebrations.[1]

Modern categories of social scientific and humanist reflection historically evolved in the nineteenth century in a world that was being reshaped by colonialism and its political twin, nationalism. Culture, society, state, literature, art, economy, and so on came to be posited as objects/fields of study, co-incidental to national boundaries—hence, common usages like Indian society, Indian art, Indian economy, and so on. And yet, the analytical mechanisms by which these different concepts/objects came to be 'nationalized' varied, as did the protocols of the disciplines earmarked for the study of these distinct objects/fields. Take the example of how art and economy came to be differently disciplined. Art and economics share the conception of 'value', but they understand value in mutually opposed ways. Economic objects such as labour, commodity, and money are defined as values that can be priced in relation to each other via a universal mechanism of exchange, while art objects are defined as 'priceless', being unique and therefore resistant to common measure and equivalence (Poovey 2008). Consequently, the study of Indian art and the study of the Indian economy

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came to imagine the salience of the nation in fundamentally different ways, one routinely deploying civilizational and cultural rhetoric in the name of the nation, the other deploying a universal and global rhetoric, though also in the name of the nation. It is for this reason that the two disciplines relate very differently to postcolonial and decolonial criticism, which by critiquing coloniality as a modern form of knowledge/power also critiques the apparent universality and self-evidence of the nation-form. It is also for this reason that the two disciplines of economics and art and aesthetics tend to differently imagine the world in which they situate and animate the nation.

To capture the relational dynamic and the mutual referencing through which the various disciplines have historically evolved in postcolonial India, we avoid organizing the volume as a set of chapters focused on discrete disciplinary histories. Instead, we focus on specific conceptual complexes and reflect on how diverse disciplinary fields might have differently approached these complexes. Put otherwise, we seek to critically reflect upon our conceptual vocabulary, methodological, archival, and locational diversity, and, indeed, our shared epistemological futures, by bringing into focus the ways in which disciplines come to be separate and autonomous but also conceptually twinned—as were history and anthropology by way of a disciplinary splitting of the event from the everyday and economics and political science by way of the separation of the market from the state.

The contributors, in their diverse ways, engage with the conceptual complexes that can be identified as animating the life of disciplines in contemporary India—history–time, state–citizenship, economy–development, literature–translation, media–communication, gender–sexuality, identity–inequality, society–culture, self–affect, philosophy–religion, ecology–environment, and so on. Some chapters reflect more directly on histories of specific disciplines, while others approach concepts from trans- or even extra-disciplinary angles, and yet others reflect on why a certain concern—say religion—never really became a discipline in India (as did religious studies in the United States academy). Varuni Bhatia's chapter, '"Heathen" to Vishwa-Guru', explores why Indian universities never set up religious studies departments even as religion came to be India's national export to the world. Rohan D'Souza's chapter, 'Past Politics and Future Environments', reflects on the difficulty of setting up environmental studies as a nationally oriented discipline in the age of planetary ecological crisis. The volume focuses primarily on the twentieth century, but of necessity reflects on late-nineteenth-century colonial antecedents, while also thinking about

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the future of the conjoined entities that we are calling the nation and its disciplines.

The Colonial Antecedents

Modern humanities and social science disciplines in India have their roots in colonialism, in colonial institutions and modes of governance that produced 'knowledge' about India and remained for the longest time the sole custodians of such knowledge. This early phase can be divided into two parts. The first part developed through institutions like the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784) and the College at Calcutta's Fort William (1800) and initiated a mode of inquiry that in later decades became the discipline of Indology. Primarily concerned with India's pasts, and the textual inscription of such histories, this form of knowledge production was focused more on textualization, translation, and philological inquiries, leading to close reading and hermeneutic deciphering of religious, philosophical, literary, legal, and other texts. The second part developed through what Bernard Cohn calls the various investigative modalities of colonial governance, including census, survey, map-making, ethnography, and so on (Cohn 1996). This phase concentrated on turning the social world of the colony into massive sets of information and statistical data, with a clear view to producing a governable version of India. As opposed to the previous one, this second phase was more 'empirical' in nature, as it embraced the contemporary reality of the colony as its immediate object of study.

Modern university systems with modern disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences were introduced in India during the colonial period. While some of these disciplines, like English literature or anthropology, directly grew out of these histories of colonial governance and its myriad techniques to engage with and control indigenous populations and their cultural worlds, other disciplines, such as political economy, were introduced as subjects with clearly defined European provenance. Such disciplines signalled a break from pre-colonial knowledge systems—often denigrating them as inadequate, anachronistic, and irrelevant—and claimed to usher in the modern knowledge paradigms in the colony.

One of the most striking features of early university systems in the nineteenth century was its almost exclusive investment in disciplines that were deemed fit for the colony or the production of a pliant bureaucracy for governance. This emphasis meant little investment in the sciences and almost exclusive focus on the humanities and the social sciences. Theoretical and empirical sciences in the colony came about almost entirely through

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nationalist interest in science and technology—Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (1876), Indian Institute of Science (1899), National Council of Education (1906), and so on. This dissociation between colonial preference for the humanities and the social sciences (often brought under the expansive rubric of the 'arts') and nationalist inclination towards sciences greatly shaped not only the universities in India but also the broader landscape of knowledge production. Some attempts were made to intervene in this context—though mostly in the humanities—through imagining alternative university systems in the early part of the twentieth century, like Banaras Hindu University (1916), Aligarh Muslim University (1920), Jamia Millia Islamia (1920), Visva-Bharati (1921), and so on. These new universities—often conceived as radically different from the colonial model as exemplified by the universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras—introduced pre-colonial knowledge systems or more recent developments like Indology or comparative studies of religions, languages, and literatures. There was also the National Council of Education, Bengal (1906), now Jadavpur University, set up as part of the *swadeshi* effort towards technical education of Indians.

The Postcolonial Decades

The first decades after independence saw a flurry of institution-building efforts. The University Grants Commission (UGC) was set up in 1953 (and became a statutory body in 1956) to support higher education. The Kothari Commission met between 1964 and 1966 to deliberate on how education could become an instrument of nation-building, geared to increase productivity, promote national integration, enable modernization, and encourage the moral, spiritual, and social values proper to national citizenship. Given this imagination, it was unsurprising that the commission was focused largely on free and compulsory primary education for all. The committee for higher education, led by the then UGC chairperson D. S. Kothari, rendered higher education too in the image of mass education in citizenship, asking that universities conduct literacy missions, adult education, part-time and correspondence courses, agricultural and industrial training, farmers' education, and even assist schools in quantitative self-improvement. Stating that Indian universities had responsibilities exceeding that of universities elsewhere, the commission exhorted them to become the 'conscience of the nation', by not only fostering a 'climate of tolerance' conducive to debate and discussion but also educating the masses to help them participate in nation-building (Kothari 1966: 555).

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While research was mentioned—as when recommending the setting up of centres of excellence and institutional clusters for advanced study—the overall emphasis was on teaching, oriented to the eradication of illiteracy and the inclusion of women, minorities, and the socially disadvantaged. However, to promote research in the social sciences, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), freed of the compulsory focus on pedagogy, came to be established in 1969 as separate from the UGC. Paradoxically, this resulted in an enduring sense of a trade-off between teaching and research, which continues to haunt higher education thinking in India.

As is well known, nation-building in the postcolonial decades was based on a prioritization of science and technology. Science was seen as key to not only the economic and infrastructural development of the nation but also the cultivation of a rational and modern disposition amongst the citizenry, to help them overcome social and cultural differences and come together as a nation. As Itty Abraham argues, science and technology became the ideology of the newly constituted nation state, the framework of both nation-building and international engagement (Abraham 1998: 26–30). Encompassed by this political culture of scientism, the social sciences and humanities in India came to be torn between the imperatives of modernization–development on the one hand and nationalism–culture on the other, the former pitched as a universal and the latter as a civilizational imperative. Science itself was plagued by debates on whether or not it was a foreign knowledge-form, leading to diverse responses from Indian intellectuals, ranging from those who sought to scientifically validate traditional Indian knowledges to those who sought to propagate rationality amongst the masses through popular science movements to those who critiqued the violence of 'big science' and propagated organic small technologies (Abraham 2006: 210–217; Kannan 1990; Nandy 1988; Prakash 1999). Arun Mohan Sukumar has recently shown how universal science and unique civilization became the enduring framing binary of Indian nationalism from the time of Madan Mohan Malaviya to that of Narendra Modi (Sukumar 2020). To the extent that the social sciences drew upon science as the modular form of modern evidence-based knowledge, these came to be prioritized in India over what in other contexts came to be known as the liberal arts or the humanities. The social sciences—especially economics, sociology, and political science—were now seen as tied to the developmental imperative of the nation, while the humanities—history, philosophy, and literature—were seen as primarily concerned with India's unique civilizational character.

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In 1953–1954, the Sahitya Akademi, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, and the Lalit Kala Akademi were set up to support practitioners of literature, music, drama, and painting. The National School of Drama, initially a constituent of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, became independent in 1975, more than a decade later than the Film and Television Institute of India, which was set up in 1960. Thus far there was no institutionalization of a field called the humanities as such (unlike the social sciences, which were given its own council in 1969), for the creative arts were imagined primarily as a domain of practitioners and aesthetes rather than academics and critics, though these cultural institutions did support supplementary academic activities such as translations, conferences, state of the field surveys, awards, and publications. However, soon afterwards, the Indian Council for Historical Research and the Indian Council for Philosophical Research were set up in 1972 and 1977, respectively, for it was clear that the discipline of history was at the heart of narrativizing the nation's unity, identity, and antiquity. After all, India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's magnum opus, *The Discovery of India*, was nothing if not a work of history (Nehru 1946). It also widely came to be believed that philosophy could help mitigate India's violent and divisive 'religion problem' by recasting religion from being an identity question to being a philosophical question concerned with the meaning and purpose of human life, an argument made most famously by the philosopher-statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (Radhakrishnan 1927; 1929).

The postcolonial history of non-science disciplines in India unfolded in this institutional and ideological context, marked by a preferential focus on the social sciences. Economics, of course, was the dominant social science discipline that the newly independent nation state looked to for solutions to India's colonial underdevelopment. However, in India, economics came to be loosely coupled with sociology, seen as critical to diagnosing the traditional, social, and cultural predilections of the masses who were to be imbued with modern economic reason. Reminiscing about the so-called Lucknow school of economics in India, which famously co-thematized sociology and economics, the communist intellectual P. C. Joshi, deeply involved in the institutional thinking of the early postcolonial years, noted that national planning would suffer if economics was overemphasized at the cost of sociology (P. C. Joshi 1986). The Delhi School of Economics was set up in 1949, with economists V. K. R. V. Rao, B. N. Ganguly, P. N. Dhar, and K. N. Raj (future editor of the *Economic and Political Weekly*) as faculty. Rao brought in M. N. Srinivas, a renowned sociologist and proponent of the Sanskritization thesis, to establish an aligned department

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of sociology, who in turn recruited pioneering sociologists M. S. A. Rao, André Beteille, and A. M. Shah. The Institute of Economic Growth was set up in 1958, also with a faculty consisting of economists, sociologists, and demographers (Kumar and Mookherjee 1995). The Indian Statistical Institute, set up in 1931 and declared an 'institute of national importance' in 1959, came to be directly involved in national planning and setting up the primary socio-economic index of India, the National Sample Survey, thus going beyond the limited statistical field of national income accounting (Menon 2022). In alliance with economics, thus, sociology in India focused on questions of development and change, self-consciously stepping aside from the humanist conception of culture as imagined by British and American anthropology (Deshpande 2007). Amongst other factors, it was this economism and developmentalism of the early postcolonial decades that inspired the 'cultural turn' in the Indian economy in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the postcolonial decades, disciplines in India evolved under the overarching rubric of 'transition', to an imminent future of cultural unity, economic development, social equality, and political modernity. Here, we flag three debates of the times to demonstrate how different disciplines, despite diverse protocols of study, shared a stake in this transition imaginary. These are the well-known debates around: (*a*) *swaraj* in ideas, (*b*) tradition and modernity, and (*c*) modes of production. The '*swaraj* in ideas' debate was initiated by philosophers. In a 1928 lecture, the philosopher Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya had given out a call for *swaraj* in ideas, arguing that without intellectual self-determination, political freedom had no meaning. Philosophy—not as an esoteric discipline meant for a contemplative few but as the historical self-understanding of a people—should lead this struggle for intellectual liberation. Though often misunderstood as a traditionalist scholar who propagated philosophical nativism, Bhattacharyya believed that the problem of India was not that it adopted foreign ideas but that it did so unthinkingly, that is, without subjecting new ideas to critical reflection and cultural translation. In the process, Indians not only lost touch with their own traditions, they also failed to make Western traditions their own (K. C. Bhattacharyya 1928).

Philosophers in postcolonial India remained uneasy with Bhattacharyya's interest in Indic philosophies, given the nation's explicit commitment to modernity and to overcoming traditional Brahmanical monopoly of knowledge. In 1977, A. P. Rao criticized Indian philosophers for being obsessed with their millennia-old philosophical inheritance, trying to match up to European philosophy's claim to have originated as far back

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as in Graeco-Roman antiquity (Rao 1977). In 1984, a special issue of the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* invited responses from various contemporary thinkers to Bhattacharyya's formulation of *swaraj* in ideas. The editorial, by three philosophers and a linguist, attributed what they called the Orwellian experience of the year 1984—when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by 'secessionist' Sikh militants and ordinary Sikhs murdered on the streets of Delhi in retributive violence (1984 was also the year of the Bhopal gas tragedy)—to the costly forgetting of Gandhian political thought and the philosophical project of *swaraj* in ideas (Mayaram 2022). And yet, as Jonardan Ganeri shows, respondents felt more compelled to prove that Indian philosophy had overcome its traditionalism than to prove that it had freed itself from Euro-American intellectual hegemony (Ganeri 2017). Daya Krishna stated that Indian philosophy must dis-identify equally with Indic and European traditions (Krishna 1984: 821). He went on to conceive of philosophy as a product of dialogue and disputation—between Indian academics who did philosophy in English and traditional pandits (and occasionally *ulama*s) who wrote in the classical languages. An interesting result was the book *Samvada*, the transcript of a week-long conversation held in Pune between analytical philosophers and scholars of classical philosophy on the question of whether or not the concept of a 'proposition' was necessary to determine the truth or falsity of an idea (Krishna et al. 1991).

As philosophy departments in India took to teaching Indian and Western philosophies as distinct courses, scholars largely abandoned their earlier efforts to overcome the colonial stereotype of Indian philosophy as an other-worldly, metaphysical tradition. Instead, they took to mobilizing Indic concepts to add new perspectives to what they saw as universal philosophical problems. Remembering Jitendra Nath Mohanty, Arindam Chakrabarti writes that Mohanty was a rare philosopher who read and taught (in Sanskrit, German, and English) Patañjali, Vyāsa, Śaṅkara, Gangeśa, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Frege, Wittgenstein, Hume, McTaggart, Russell, Davidson, and Dummett with equal expertise—showing how 'fusion philosophy', rather than a *swaraj* in ideas, had become by the 1970s the preferred stance of academic philosophers (Chakrabarti and Weber 2015; Chakrabarti 2024).

This volume unfortunately does not have a chapter by a philosopher who could reflect on why philosophy departments came to be somewhat marginal to postcolonial epistemological imaginaries, despite the history within philosophy of an intense debate on intellectual decolonization. But an analogous debate, without explicitly invoking the idea of *swaraj*,

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took place within the discipline of literary studies (often under the rubrics of 'comparative literature' and later 'world literature'), reflecting on what it meant to teach English literature in a colony and whether something called 'Indian' literature was conceivable in the first place in a nation that spoke multiple tongues (Devy 1995; S. Joshi 1991; Sunder Rajan 1992; Tharu 1998; Viswanathan 1989). Baidik Bhattacharya's chapter, 'The Curious Case of "Indian literature"', in this volume squarely addresses this question. Also worth mentioning here is the philosophical salience of literary figures who reflected on the question of whether or not there was an identifiable Indic way of thinking. Poet-scholar A. K. Ramanujan argued that Indic thinking—deeply heterogeneous, if not self-contradictory—was about a refusal to posit context-free ideas. It consisted of a diversity of perspectival ideas and so was not readily reducible to the European image of philosophy as a meta-discipline made up of systematic, coherent, universal propositions (Ramanujan 1989). The playwright Girish Karnad, who acknowledged Ramanujan's influence on his theatrical experiments with figures from Indian history and mythology, and the caste-radical historian D. R. Nagaraj were also public philosophers, who are seldom written into the history of Indian philosophy as a discipline (Karnad 1989; Nagaraj 2014).

In India, thus, the culture critic (not to be confused with a 'cultural studies' scholar) seemed to take the place of philosophers, re-reading myths, popular common sense, and pre-colonial spiritual-cum-aesthetic oeuvres, including Bhakti and Sufi expressive forms, in order to discuss Indic modes of being, thinking, and speaking. (The 'Indic' was different from the Indological, in that it deliberately went beyond textual study and engaged with both historical and contemporary aspects of the popular, the vernacular.) Social psychologists like Ashis Nandy and Sudhir Kakar also emerged as culture critics of this variety, contesting the universality of modern epistemologies (Nandy 1983; Kakar 1978). The sociologist J. P. S. Uberoi too assumed a similar stance, writing an essay titled 'Science and Swaraj' (Uberoi 1968). He set up a European Studies Programme at the Department of Sociology in Delhi as a laboratory for the development of Indian sociological perspectives on Western theory and philosophy. As much a culture critic as a sociologist—discussing agrarian technology, the atom bomb, Sikhism, the university in India, the US military-industrial complex and diverse other topics of currency—Uberoi also wrote the essay 'Metaphysics of the Indian Modernity: The Theory of the Name', anchoring Indian modernity in the sixteenth-century Bhakti devotional tradition and in Sikh political aesthetics (Uberoi and Tyabji 2019).

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The 'tradition–modernity' debate too was a transition debate by another name, led by sociologists and political scientists. In 1968, the Indian monthly *Seminar* published a special issue on the theme of 'academic colonialism', showcasing contributions by Indian sociologists. In his opening note, Satish Saberwal, a self-proclaimed sociologist amongst historians, spoke not only about the colonial antecedents of the discipline of anthropology but of the more generalized colonization of the mind caused by Indian academics' voluntary adoption of Western education, Western categories of thought, and the value-frame of modern science (Saberwal 1968). Note the clear resonance here with the '*swaraj* in ideas' debate. There is a rich scholarship on the history of sociology and social anthropology in India (Chadha and Joseph 2018; Chaudhuri 2003; 2010; Das 2006; Patel 2011a; 2011b; Uberoi, Deshpande, and Sundar 2007). Many early sociologists in India had tried to translate Euro-American concepts into indigenous categories of thought. Benoy Kumar Sarkar 'discovered' evidence of positivism in the classical Hindu traditions and Dhurjati Prasad Mukerji found in the Upanishadic tradition an alternative, more equitable definition of human progress (Uberoi, Deshpande, and Sundar 2007: 22). This trend petered out in the postcolonial decades, and sociology's focus on classical texts came to be discredited as a residue of the Orientalist discipline of Indology (Edward Said's *Orientalism* was published in 1978). Louis Dumont's 1970 book *Homo Hierarchicus* was the last of its kind, which was roundly criticized for being overly preoccupied with classical Brahmanical texts and ignoring the changing practices of caste in India.

Indian sociologists also felt compelled to act as culture critics and public philosophers. Many wrote in genres other than the academic—essays, novels, and poetry—and languages other than English. D. P. Mukerji wrote a novel trilogy in Bangla using the metaphor of the flowing river to record deep transformations in the life of the nation. Iravati Karve won the Sahitya Akademi prize for her Marathi novel *Yuganta*, which retold the story of the epic *Mahabharata* to signpost epochal change in the contemporary. Several sociologists also saw themselves as participants in post-1947 developmental projects. S. C. Dube actively participated in early community development projects (Dube 1955; 1958), the Gandhian sociologist N. K. Bose was the commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the heterodox colonial anthropologist Verrier Elwin became the government's advisor on the administration of India's northeastern frontier, Patrick Geddes led urban planning and architectural experiments, Irawati Karve undertook research on urbanization and displacement by large dams for the Planning Commission, and A. R. Desai, a Communist Party of India member, wrote

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of and participated in working class movements (Uberoi, Deshpande, and Sundar 2007: 40, 44).

Sujata Patel describes postcolonial Indian sociology as being anchored to methodological nationalism. Colonial scholars had studied Indian society as a conglomeration of institutions that were supposedly unchanging survivals of the past—the village community, caste, tribe, kinship, and religion—subjecting them to the methods of cultural anthropology and Indology. Methodological nationalists also focused on these so-called traditional sites but redescribed them as dynamic and changing. Pitted against American anthropology's synchronic notion of 'culture' and German and British Indology's focus on classical texts, Indian sociology henceforth became a field-based discipline, invested in studying social transformation under global and national processes of modernization and development (Madan 2011; Patel 2011a; 2011b). It also became keenly aware of the disciplinary implications of moving from the study of cultural others to the study of one's own society, where tribals, peasants, and workers were coeval with the anthropologist as equal citizens of the nation (Beteille 1974). Even though the discipline was initially divided between isolationists, who argued for the cultural autarky of communities, especially 'tribes', of the nation, and integrationists, who argued for cultural integration of all communities (Xaxa 2016), sociology in postcolonial India saw cultural difference not as a vector of otherness but as the very structure of Indian nationhood (notice the parallel with the idea of Indian literature as analysed by Bhattacharya in this volume).

In conversation with sociology, political science in India too came to argue against the tradition–modernity dichotomy by focusing on the facts of development and change. Rajni Kothari, who founded the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi to study the evolution of India's young democracy, brought sociologists like D. L. Seth and social psychologists like Ashis Nandy on board. Kothari argued that any study of the interactions between the caste system and modern democracy in India disproves the conventional tradition–modernity binary—for under the impact of Western education, nationalist mobilization, and universal adult franchise, caste and community in India had evolved into modern democratic identities (Kothari and Maru 1965). Kothari was a critique of both universalist imaginaries of modernization and relativist imaginaries of cultural path-dependencies. Suggesting that Indian academics give up on the universal–particular and modernity–tradition binaries, Kothari argued that postcolonial thinkers learn to stay with 'contradictions' instead of forcing a resolution by imposing a priori theoretical frameworks. Kothari offered an

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interesting redefinition of development, which, according to him, involved first a differentiation of the state from society and then their subsequent reintegration on the basis of new institutions and protocols—a process that was always troubled and ambivalent because it was inevitably accompanied by an intensification of popular mobilization, participation, and struggle. In his reading, in developing societies, institution-building chased democratic mobilization, until modernity itself came to be 'traditionalized', leading to a cessation of mobilization and a stabilization of the 'system' (Kothari 1968). This framework for the study of changing state–society relations became globally salient via Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph's landmark book, *The Modernity of Tradition*, as they, like Kothari, proposed a comparative rather than a nationalist framework for the study of different trajectories of modernization (Rudolph and Rudolph 1984). Similarly, Francine Frankel and M. S. A. Rao showed how the apparently traditional values of purity and pollution transformed under changing land ownership patterns, military forces, and political alliances, while disaggregating the nation as so many regional formations (Frankel and Rao 1989).

The term 'transition', literally, was at stake in the 'mode of production debate' in India during 1960–1980, led primarily by historians and economists.[2] The question at stake here was whether modern India was feudal or capitalist and, consequently, where it was located on the path to socialism. Socialism, as we know, was an ideal that permeated public discourse at this time, cutting across the ideological spectrum. Historians now debated whether there was feudalism, semi-feudalism, and/or 'capitalist potentials' in India's past or whether colonial subordination meant that India was already 'subsumed' under the capitalist mode of production without having quite industrialized, or whether colonialism could itself be conceived of as a distinctive mode of production unforeseen by Marx, or whether one must rehabilitate Marx's under-theorized conception of the Asiatic mode of production for India, and so on (Alavi 1980; Banaji 1972; Habib 1969; Mukhia 1999; Sharma 1984; Thorner 1982). Economists on their part debated the class structure of India's agrarian society, asking if landlords and middle farmers can be understood as capitalists, depending on whether they reinvested their surplus in productive activities or in non-productive activities such as hoarding and usury. They also debated modes of surplus extraction in the Indian countryside in terms of the relative weightage of rent, revenue, and interest in the landlord's income. They asked if landless peasants in India could be understood as 'free' wage labour engaged in class struggle, if production arrangements such as sharecropping should be seen as capitalist or pre-capitalist, and whether

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the received European theory of class relations applied to India's peasant society (Patnaik 1990; Chakrabarti and Cullenberg 2003). The transition imaginary even informed debates around the nature of the postcolonial nation state. Political theorists deployed the Gramscian notion of 'passive revolution' to describe the Indian state as a contingent class settlement between modern capitalists and feudal landlords, a temporal mismatch that held up proper democratic transition and economic modernization of the country (Kaviraj 1988).

The Contemporary

By the 1980s, the promise of transition had begun to sound hollow. The postcolonial decades had seen incessant public agitation—food movements, refugee mobilization, religious conflicts, language agitations, struggles for land redistribution, industrial and transport strikes, armed communist insurgency, urban Dalit mobilizations, student agitations against political corruption, women's movements, movements for autonomy of forest, hill, and frontier peoples, and struggles against environmental degradation and the displacement of locals by large infrastructural projects. The nation appeared to be unravelling, with multiple imaginaries of the future locked in battle—capitalist growth versus communist equality, Hindu Rashtra versus secular nationalism, statism versus democracy, federalism versus centralism, autonomy versus integration, developmentalism versus environmentalism, and so on. The crisis came to a head in the Indian Emergency of 1975 when the government suspended democratic rights in the name of national productivity, poverty alleviation, demographic control, and, ironically, socialism, exposing the authoritarian nature of a state trying to hold a nation together in the name of development and modernization.

Social sciences and humanities in India now came to question the imagination of the nation as a civilizational unity, while also questioning the long-standing belief that the nation was on a straight and narrow path to modernity. For it was now clear that the nation was not one but a disaggregated formation of different identities—caste, class, gender, language, indigeneity, religion, even nationality—each with a different relationship to the promise of modernity. Both the liberal assumption that these diverse identities would eventually resolve into the culturally unmarked figure of the national citizen and the Marxist belief that class identity will overdetermine all other identities had come to a naught. Liberalism and Marxism, despite their apparent ideological opposition, shared the assumption that the economic imperative would eventually

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override the social, cultural, and religious dissensus within the nation—an assumption that had led to not only the hegemony of economics but also the rule of economic determinism in history. Henceforth, social histories and cultural histories—of diverse regions, languages, identities, and archives—replaced economic history, inaugurating what has come to be known as the 'cultural turn' in the academy. (Of course, the cultural turn was also a global development as 'race studies' came to question the dominance of Marxist economism in the academy.) In the 1990s, the political theorist Partha Chatterjee tellingly went on to re-narrativize the nation in terms of its 'fragments' (Chatterjee 1993).

This was also the time when scholars and students demanded separate fields dedicated to the study of distinct social groups. As Mallarika Sinha Roy shows in her chapter, 'Feminism at the Crossroads?', in this volume, women's studies departments came to be established in Indian universities after decades-long struggle (Dutoya 2022). Demands for dedicated caste studies, Dalit studies, and Adivasi studies departments, however, are still to fructify. In this volume, Ankit Kawade writes of postcolonial struggles to remake the university as a casteless space of thought. There are, of course, several tribal research institutes in India that were set up early on under the aegis of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and an Indian Institution of Dalit Studies that was set up in 2003 in Delhi. However, these are not quite integrated into the university system, where the proliferation of departments for the study of exclusion and discrimination continued to club together diverse disadvantaged identities without adequate attention to the problem of 'competing inequalities' (Galanter 1984). In the university, agitations continue till date for the inclusion of hitherto excluded topics and authors in the curricula and canon of all disciplines. The recent initiative by the faculty of several English literature departments to put together a canon of Dalit literature in vernacular languages is an example of how a successful reimagination of the nation's literary tradition from the perspective of its Dalits may lead to a reimagination of the discipline of literary studies itself (Tharu and Satyanarayana 2011).

The year 1989 was a momentous one, with two events indexing two opposing political tendencies of the time: the official adoption of the Mandal Commission recommendations, which further disaggregated the nation in terms of caste groups, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid at the hands of Hindutva activists, who proclaimed Hindu unity as the future of the nation (J. Lee 2023). It was also when the Soviet Union collapsed, putting a question mark on socialism as ideology and state-led development as a national project. The spiralling away of multiple nationalities from the

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Eastern Bloc also bolstered long-standing 'separatist' demands in Punjab, Kashmir, and the Northeast. In the 1980s, India had borrowed heavily from international lenders, in part to finance infrastructure and industrialization, leading to a foreign debt crisis by the end of the decade, a crisis further exacerbated by the rise in crude oil prices owing to the Gulf War and the fall of the Eastern Bloc, which had trade relations with India and allowed for rupee exchange. In 1990–1991, India pledged its gold reserves with foreign banks and agreed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank's demands for liberalization of the economy to allow foreign capital participation, including in public enterprises (Nayyar 2017). Despite the heightened nationalist rhetoric of the 1990s, the global entanglement and exposure of the nation were now unmistakably clear.

This was also the moment when the discipline of economics abandoned its century-long methodological nationalism and espoused mainstream Euro-American economics. Courses on Indian economic thought, Indian economic history, and Marxism-inspired political economy gave way to globally standardized economics courses (S. Bhattacharyya 2018). With its increasing mathematization, economics became yet more distant from the other social science and humanities disciplines. Aashish Velkar's chapter, 'Economic Knowledge and the "Indian" Economy', thematizes the changing relationship of the discipline of economics with the nation; but not just in economics, the impact of the 'global', following the so-called end of history in 1989, was felt in other disciplines too. Literary studies scholars now tilted more towards the study of what came to be called 'world literature' rather than national and/or comparative literature and brought translation to the heart of the discipline (Bhattacharya 2018; Ganguly 2023). Historians began to write 'global intellectual history', recasting erstwhile nationalist icons such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Rabindranath Tagore as global thinkers and re-thematizing so-called Western ideologies, such as liberalism and Marxism, as global formations co-produced by peoples of the North and the South (Manjapra 2020; Mehta 2018; Moyn and Sartori 2013; Sartori 2014). The historiographical school of 'connected histories' criticized national histories on the grounds that the Indian subcontinent was always deeply entangled with histories of other world regions, connections that came to be artificially severed through the ideological work of colonialism and nationalism (Subrahmanyam 1997). Attention also returned to various mid-twentieth-century 'internationalisms' that once accompanied decolonial thinking—such as Third World Internationalism, pan-Islamism, and working class internationalism—as scholars recalled how anti-colonial thinkers like Tagore had criticized the narrow-mindedness of nationalism

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and claimed the 'world' itself as the habitat of the human (Chatterjee 2011; Maclean 2017; Raza 2020; Sinha 1999; Viswanathan 2004).

At this time, a number of interdisciplinary fields also emerged dedicated to the study of global phenomena. By the late 1990s, several institutes for the study of cross-border migration came up in India, which indexed rising interest in the worldwide movement of labour and capital while also reanimating India's Partition memories, the plight of refugees, and the violence and bloodshed that attended the nation's birth. Urban studies as a field came into its own around the idea that cities were multinational entities that were networked with each other in ways that were relatively indifferent to national borders. Social anthropology now shifted its focus from the rural and narrativized the urban everyday as it folded into the common experience of 'critical events'—to cite Veena Das here—such as the Bhopal gas leak, which was both a global and a national event of consequence (Das 1995). While attending to national and regional oeuvres and styles, film and media studies emerged as a field of scholarship that explicitly acknowledged the global circulation of images, shared technological devices and designs, and cross-border infrastructural connections, in ways that exceeded the frame of the nation. (See Ravi Vasudevan's chapter, 'India in Film Studies', in the volume.) Similarly, environmental studies struggled to find a framing that could simultaneously accommodate within the same narrative the twin concerns of local ecologies and planetary entanglements. (See Rohan D'Souza's chapter, 'Past Politics and Future Environments') Eventually, even a so-called unique national institution such as caste came to be globalized, reanimating the long history of the co-thinking of caste and race, Dalit-ness and Black-ness, in India (Yengde 2022).

Framing these twin moves—of going beneath and beyond the nation, that is, of simultaneously attending to sub-national fragments and global interconnections—was the much-discussed postcolonial turn (Seth 2021). Already in the 1980s, subaltern studies historians had accused nationalist and Marxist scholars of intellectual elitism. Wearing the spectacles of colonial knowledge, the nationalists and Marxists failed to apprehend the autonomous world of subaltern politics in India. From this critique of colonial epistemology, it was a short step to a critique of the concept of modernity itself, which underlay the nationalist project of development and modernization. At the turn of the millennium, scholars began speaking of 'multiple modernities' and 'alternative modernities' (Casanova 2011; Eisenstadt 2022; Gaonkar 2001; R. Lee 2006). The argument was that the Euro-American model of industrial modernity was only one possible configuration of the modern. So, instead of imagining modernity as

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originating in the West and then travelling to the rest of the world, we should pay attention to the different historical trajectories of the modern. The political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj argued that in contexts such as India, where democratization preceded industrialization and secularization, modernity had a very different configuration from the West, where the extension of franchise happened almost a century after large-scale industrialization and the violent proletarianization of the masses (Kaviraj 2005).

As part of this critique of modernity, scholars now worked to 'provincialize' modern norms and concepts, that is, show them up as local Euro-American inventions that did not apply to most of the world, despite their claims to universality. Thus, the political theorist Rajeev Bhargava called for a rethinking of the concept of secularism, classically defined as the separation of the church from the state, and showed how in the pluri-religious context of India, secularism meant something very different—namely, equal respect for and principled distance from multiple religions. Partha Chatterjee deconstructed the concept of civil society, which in the majority world was the privileged location of the elite with access to civic and legal rights. The masses, or the 'governed', in contrast, inhabited the paralegal domain of political society, engaged in constant negotiation with the state for episodic benefits without a corresponding conception of universal justiciable rights (Chatterjee 2004). Chatterjee also redefined democracy from being an apparently stable system based on state-ensured rights and procedural integrity to being a volatile political formation based on unpredictable popular and even populist mobilizations (Chatterjee 2009; 2019). In this volume, Garima Dhabhai's chapter, 'State, Democracy, and Modernity in Postcolonial India', explores the questions of sovereignty and democracy, and the field of political studies in postcolonial India, from the under-theorized location of the 'princely states'.

The heterodox economist Kalyan Sanyal deconstructed the concept of capitalism to show how capitalism is always already accompanied by relentless primitive accumulation, producing a surplus population in excess of what could be absorbed by the formal economy. Instead of modernizing the world as promised, capital thus reproduces non-capital by its own systemic logic (Sanyal 2007). Comparing the Jew and the Muslim in modernity, the literary scholar Amir Mufti unpacked the concept of the minority as the constructed other of the Euro-American bourgeois world of civility, civilization, and citizenship, posited as being in need of education, moral reform, modernization, and assimilation (Mufti 2007). The historian Ranajit Guha critiqued the concept of history for imposing

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a universal chronology and periodization scheme upon diverse worlds and multiple temporalities, thereby foreclosing alternative imaginations of the future (Guha 2003). And Dipesh Chakrabarty called for a rethinking of the very idea of the modern—on the grounds that modernity, by definition, rendered the colonized irrevocably 'backward', forever waiting to catch up with the West but never really doing so (Chakrabarty 2000).

It should be noted here that postcolonial scholars of India never claimed to speak in the name of an authentic Indian past uncontaminated by colonialism. Quite to the contrary. While critiquing the universalist claims of Euro-American knowledges, they admitted to the irreversibility of history and argued that postcolonial reason must, of necessity, work through colonial modern legacies that have reshaped the world for good. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously said, postcolonial critique is always already *after* the fact of empire (Spivak 1990: 228). In that sense, the postcolonial project was as much a critique of philosophical Eurocentrism as of cultural nationalism. In this, it was very different from Latin American and African decolonial scholarship. Decolonial scholarship tends to map the postcolonial world in terms of binaries—settler versus indigenous, White versus Black, pre-modern versus modern—which makes plausible authenticity claims, be it in the name of Black Reason (to cite Achille Mbembe in the case of Africa) or indigenous cosmology (to cite Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in the case of Latin America) (de Castro 2016; Mbembe 2017). However, India's pre-colonial past, marked as it is by caste, does not render itself to claims of authenticity, just as India's present, marked by multiple axes of inequality–difference—majority–minority, Brahman–non-Brahman, elite–poor, caste–class, caste–tribe, even caste–gender—makes any claim to the oneness of India appear disingenuous. In any case, the burden of postcolonial scholarship in the 2000s has been to deconstruct not only the assumed unity of the nation but also the so-called native identities of race, caste, and tribe, as it became apparent that many such seemingly naturalized identities were in fact produced through colonial demographics and then recast as 'primordial' (Dirks 2001; Ittmann, Cordell, and Maddox 2010; Kapila 2008). In this volume, showing how impossible it is to imagine an authentic national habitus, Udaya Kumar writes in 'Documenting the Self' about the complexity and heterogeneity of the postcolonial fashioning of the 'self' in India and Bhrigupati Singh discusses the problem of 'sociality' across differences and inequalities internal to the nation in his 'Unschooled Knowledge from Ancestral Spirits'. Put otherwise, they reflect on the histories of psychology and sociology from unusual ethico-political angles.

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Recently, the rise of Hindutva politics has sought to neutralize this constitutive heterogeneity of the nation and, for this purpose, has cynically appropriated the language of decolonization (Shah 2024). Rewriting history textbooks and propagating Vedic science, majoritarian forces now insist that to decolonize India is to Hinduize it and erase all traces of Islam from the nation, even though, ironically, they seem to uncritically adopt the Silicon Valley version of a techno-futurist modernity. This weaponization of the language of decolonization for authoritarian purposes has led many scholars to retreat from the long history of decolonial and postcolonial criticism in the Indian academy, in the belief that a strict adherence to the protocols of modern disciplines, as they are given to us, is the best protection against the ideological cannibalization of knowledge. The implicit argument of this volume, however, is just the opposite—that what we need today is in fact a radical rethinking of the disciplines for purposes of overcoming both coloniality and nativism. Aligning with insurgent knowledges from other parts of the world, thereby exceeding the frame of the nation, we believe, is to take back from mala fides the unfinished project of the decolonization of the social sciences and the humanities in India.

Notes

1. While there is a rich scholarship that tracks the historical trajectories of individual disciplines, there is no one volume that presents a comprehensive picture of the humanities and the social sciences in postcolonial India—with the exception of a set of essays that came out of the 2008 review of ICSSR by a group of leading Indian academics. The commentaries were published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (Chatterjee 2008). This volume seeks to trace the politics of knowledge *across* the humanities and the social sciences disciplines, and account for the postcolonial landscape in all its diversity.
2. The participants in the debate included R. S. Rao, Utsa Patnaik, Paresh Chattopadhyay, Andre Gunder Frank, Ranjit Sau, Jairus Banaji, Hamza Alavi, Ashok Rudra, Gail Omvedt, Alice Thorner, and others.

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