

Unpacking Home-grown Orientalism and Area Studies in India

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Abstract: This paper discusses the genesis and the major thrust of 'Orientalism' as a discipline and explains the term 'Home-grown Orientalism'. At a later stage, an attempt has been made to highlight the vagueness of area studies in India. It stresses the need to switch over to 'Asiocentrism' to 'Eurocentrism'. This paper also recommends the necessity to achieve intellectual independence and through Indianization of our research priorities.

THE CONTEXT

During more than a decade of its publication, one would have expected Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) to make a significant impact on (re) thinking the theory and praxis of the historical and social sciences in India as it did in the West (1986). *Orientalism* sets out to study the system of articulations, not always manifest, or conscious, by which European scholarship defined and created for itself the Orient. Spatially the Orient stretches between Egypt and China and temporally the Crusades and the present even though Said's area of immediate interest is the Islamic Orient. The assumption that the Orient is an 'imaginative geography' (Said 1978:49) is true because of history being neutralized by its field. Any change is but redissemination simply because the machinery producing knowledge remains largely static. And these forms are hooked on to all discourses about the Orient. *Orientalism* as a style of thought is characterized by an epistemological division between the Occident and Orient. In this division the Orient is the silent other; unconsulted because '(t) hey (i.e., the Orientals) cannot represent themselves; they must be represented' (Marx 1977:478).

Indian scholars are caught up in the tyranny of the Orientalist discourse in which they were educated. They are Orientals in that they have been 'othered' in the discourse of the West about India; they are Orientalists in that they study and 'other' their subjects of study—the subordinate Orientals. This dual facet of othering as well as being othered by the tyranny of an as yet unshakeable colonial discourse that has been unquestioningly internalized, shall be called 'home-grown Orientalism'.

The idea of home-grown Orientalism may at first sight appear to be a contradiction in terms; for Orientalism necessarily presupposes the existence, the opposition of two worlds, two geographical or mental spaces; the privileged term Occident making the Orient its objective of study. What our thesis as a corollary to Said's sets out to claim is the further division of the Orient (in this case India) in which the received dominant discourse of the West is assimilated without really challenging it; and continues to carry forward its hegemony in imposing

the same values and weaknesses on their objects of inquiry which are thereby rendered marginal. In this era of decolonization, our quarrel is with that grid, that matrix of western imperial culture that continues to subsume our tastes and values.

Area studies in India

It is time now that the prevailing vagueness of area studies in India is subjected to close scrutiny with the highest academic integrity. The *raison detre* behind area studies programmes in India is, we argue here, very much a product of the mind-set determined by Orientalist discourse.

The 'Area Studies' experts gathered at the national seminar on 'Area Studies in India: Retrospect and Prospect' admitted that the concept of 'area studies' is a western (more specifically, North American) Legacy. What they failed to point out was the lack of any indigenous rethinking in the area. It shall be useful to see how much we really rely on and drive from the west.

H.A.R. Gibb (1964), Director of Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard, in his book *Area Studies Reconsidered* has used the terms 'area studies' and 'Orientalism' interchangeably. He prescribes an 'interdisciplinary' approach with the objective of preparing students for careers in 'public life and business'. Leonard Binder in his '1974 Presidential Address' to this Centre has noted: that area studies, hold that true knowledge is only possible of things that exist, while methods and theories are abstractions, which order observations and offer explanations according to non-empirical criteria (Binder 1975:5). Said has labelled area studies as the 'new American Orientalism'.

That 'area studies' centres are meant to be concerned more with policy formulation than as institutions for theoretical or pure academic research is clear. Said rightly observed that 'modern Orientalists' or 'area experts' (in the West) are indistinguishable from other experts of what Harold Lasswell has called 'policy sciences'. Hence, both these groups lay emphasis on 'the military-national-security possibilities of an alliance' (Said 1978:197).

We would like to point out here that the term 'Oriental Studies' used mainly in the United Kingdom was replaced in America and elsewhere by 'Area Studies'. The nomenclative preference is apparently linked to the shift of the epicentre of the western power from the United Kingdom to the United States of America after the Second World War. Stress was also laid on according 'equal respect to all cultures and minority or ethnic 'heritages' while ignoring the relations of domination that have existed and still do exist among them' (Inden 1986:438). While 'Oriental Studies' was thus characterized mainly by the ideology of colonization 'Area Studies' (at least in the West) was protective of the post-colonial interests. Thus if the former was a medium of colonial expansion the latter became a plea for maintaining the colonial bequest.

Oriented as they are in particular cultural and disciplinary traditions, area study formulators and scholars in India have largely failed to transcend the permeated discourse setting forth the rationale of area study programmes as is evinced in the papers presented by the august gathering at the seminar mentioned above.

It was in April 1963 that the University Grants Commission (UGC) for the first time constituted an Experts Committee 'to consider a scheme for the development of area studies in Indian universities. (Appadorai 1987:137). But the recommendations made by this Committee as described by Appadorai in his address at the Fifth Annual Convocation of the Indian School of International Studies on May 28, 1970 and reproduced in *International Studies* show that the Indian understanding of this concept has not been much different from that in the West. Apparently, this Committee was guided by the model of Indian School of International Studies in New Delhi established in 1955 and merged with Jawaharlal Nehru University (with the word 'Indian' dropped) in 1970.

The UGC guidelines issued to various area study centres in India from time to time reflect little indigenization. The original guidelines of the UGC had emphasized, among other things, that researches under the area study programmes should be approached from 'interdisciplinary' point of view. Special programmes for 'both research and training of personnel were also recommended: *a la the Orientalists*. The revised guidelines dated January 5, 1982 added that there should be a 'close interaction between the academics in the programme and the administrative machinery of the Government of India'. The UGC guidelines dated June 27, 1984 have nothing important to say but the latest circular dated September 23, 1987 has two points central to our demystifying argument.

1. 'The result of the studies in these centres should be useful in the formulation of our national policies in foreign affairs, defence, culture and in the spheres of bilateral, multilateral and regional cooperation...'
2. 'Area Studies centre shall hereafter include in their studies and research not merely the history, politics and economics of the countries concerned, but science and technology, culture, religion and philosophy. More importantly they should relate to the present and be relevant.'

Thus, the objectives and methods of area studies in India reflect practically no qualitative difference between them on the one hand and the 'Oriental Studies' in England or 'Area Studies' in America. The only point of difference which may be noted is that India has some centres studying countries which are far more powerful than herself like the Soviet Russia and the European Countries also. There is also a marked difference in matters of financial support to such centres and expertise utilized in India and the West.

A case study

The case of the Centre for Himalayan Studies in North Bengal University, which is an area study centre with which one of us was attached for fairly long years, may be briefly illustrated here. It was first proposed by Amlan Dutta, the then Vice-Chancellor of this university (in his letter dated August 19, 1975) to S. Gopal, Chairman, Standing Advisory Committee on Area Studies, UGC, as a 'social scientific research centre covering North Bengal, adjoining territories on both sides of the border including Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet'. This proposal was later elaborated by the Registrar of the university. This proposal was accepted by the UGC in May 1977 but it was advised that the Centre's jurisdiction be

confined to Tibet and Bhutan. However, in June 1978, the Standing Advisory Committee of the UGC revised its earlier stand and desired that the Centre should study 'regions in the Himalayas' also.

Clear here is the 'othering' or 'distancing' of the Himalayan peoples and cultures by the mainstream. There are not only sharp geographical differences between the plains and the Himalayas but also mindspaces between them. Our perceptions about our peripheral regions and peoples do not seem to have changed to any considerable degree since 1950 when Patel communicated to Nehru:

'Our northern or northeastern approaches consist of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the tribal areas of Assam. From the point of view of communications they are weak spots... The contact of these areas with us, is by no means, close and intimate.

Sadly, even after 33 years of what Patel had written the UGC Committee constituted of experts bearing the same mind-set control to direct our area study centres. Attempting to recover the 'native voice or to generate 'counter neo-colonial' discourses in such a scenario is to face a greater challenge than the one involving the colonial discourses of the Orientalists. Barun De's (1989) urging upon 'indigenous perspectives in international studies' is commendable in this regard but his advocacy for 'a shift from Europocentrism to Asiocentrism as the priority'²⁹ would be vulnerable to a decentering analysis.

CONCLUSION

There is a strong chance of our exercise here being equated or even being thought of as derived from the protagonists of the Subaltern Studies collective. The objective of this collective, according to Ranajit Guha (1982), is

'to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian Studies and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area.

By contrast, what we have sought to attempt here in this short essay is merely to show how our institutional frameworks reflect the mind-set of the Orientalists by questioning the episteme of the native neo-colonialist texts.

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