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The Subterranean Presence of Indian Knowledge Systems in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

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Abstract: E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is chiefly acknowledged for its examination of the intricacies of colonialism, cultural discord, and the obstacles to personal relationships amid the British Raj. Nevertheless, in addition to its direct socio-political themes, the novel also discreetly interacts with aspects of what is currently referred to as Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). Although not expressly identified as such, IKS, especially in its philosophical, spiritual, and cultural aspects, serves as a significant, albeit frequently overlooked, undercurrent throughout the story. This paper contends that Forster's work, through its portrayal of specific characters, settings, and motifs, demonstrates a profound engagement with IKS, highlighting both its lasting impact and the challenges of interpreting it within a colonial context. This investigation requires an understanding of IKS, its diverse characteristics, and its subtle influence within the narrative. It will cover the spiritual and philosophical undercurrents of IKS in the novel, as well as the Cultural Practices and Traditions as Manifestations of IKS.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems; Orientalism; Western Rationalism; Cultural Conflict; Post-Colonial Literature

Introduction

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* is a complex and well-acclaimed novel that has been subject to diverse interpretations. E.M. Forster was very impressed by Indian traditions and culture. It is said that *A Passage to India* was written out of personal experiences he had in India. He propagated the ideas of universal understanding and tolerance. He obtained firsthand knowledge of Indian culture during his short span of stay in India. This novel examines the intricate relationship between British colonizers

and the Indian populace during the early 20th century. It highlights the interactions and cultural conflicts between Indian and English characters, especially through the experiences of Dr. Aziz, an Indian Muslim physician, and his friendship with Mr. Fielding, a British man. The narrative is set against the context of British rule in India, and has been studied from the perspective of racism, colonialism, and cultural clash.

While postcolonial readings have dominated critical discourse focusing on the dynamics of power and representation, this paper seeks to explore a less-examined dimension of the text, which is its engagement with the Indian Knowledge Systems. The term IKS encompasses a wide range of traditional knowledge in India, including philosophy, spirituality, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and the arts. It represents a holistic worldview that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, a concept that stands in stark contrast to the compartmentalized and often fragmented Western perspective. While Forster's novel does not provide a systematic study of IKS, it engages with several of its key aspects, particularly those related to philosophy, spirituality, and culture. This paper will analyse how these elements of IKS are represented in the novel, highlighting both their presence and the challenges of their interpretation within the colonial context. This analysis will delve into the specific ways in which IKS manifests in the characters' interactions, the symbolism of key locations, and the underlying thematic concerns of the novel. Forster's novel delves into the philosophical and spiritual undercurrents of India, often contrasting them with Western rationalism. This contrast reveals a subtle engagement with certain aspects of IKS. The novel uses symbolism, character development, and narrative structure to explore these themes.

The persona of Professor Narayan Godbole represents a philosophical viewpoint that resonates with particular aspects of Hindu ideology. His emotional distance from the ongoing conflicts within the story and his focus on an all-embracing love imply a link to the Advaita Vedanta philosophy, which asserts the unity of existence. Godbole's character acts as a foil to the practical and frequently biased perspectives of the British figures. As Forster writes:

"He was not a religious man, but he had a religious view of life. One is the same as two, and not the same as three...In his vision, there is nothing to discuss. He is - and if we were all like him, there would be no discussion." (Forster 253)

This "religious view of life", along with the merging of numerical distinctions ("One is equivalent to two"), indicates a comprehensive comprehension of the universe, a fundamental principle of much of Hindu philosophy, and a vital element of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). This challenges the Western inclination to categorize and compartmentalize, underscoring the interrelatedness of all entities. Godbole's apparently contradictory statements reveal a more profound grasp of reality that surpasses logical dichotomies. His role in the narrative encourages readers to explore alternative ways of viewing the world.

Godbole's philosophy, grounded in Advaita Vedanta, highlights the interconnectedness of all existence. He believes that the world around him is not just an assemblage of different species and personalities but the manifestation of a unified

being. This monistic idea is a primary aspect of Hindu tradition and beliefs, which implies that every soul (atman) is essentially the same as the universal entity (Brahman). Godbole's character illustrates this philosophy while not being involved in the disputes happening in his surroundings and focusing on comprehensive care and affection that shall rise above the man-made distinctions and biases.

The last section of the novel is titled "Temple," and it reasserts the influence of Hinduism and its basic philosophy. The Gokul Ashtami festival is a celebration that is centered around devotion (Bhakti) by the whole community. It totally mirrors the concept of IKS that argues for harmony and oneness in society, keeping aside the new shackles of biases and other differences. The multi-faceted and energetic atmosphere of the festival first bewilders the Western characters of the novel. However, they portray a deep sense of collective experience and spiritual connection with the Almighty. The festival is full of colours, music, and different cuisines, aligned with various traditions and rituals. This festival serves as a microcosm of India's rich and varied spiritual landscape.

Forster further draws a comparison between the rigid and logical mindset of the British and the more instinctive and mystical essence associated with India. Mrs. Moore's transformative experience in the Marabar Caves exemplifies this distinction. The echoing void she encounters questions her Christian beliefs and leads her to a profound awareness of the limitations of human comprehension. The ambiguity and apparent absurdity of the echo unsettle her initial confidence and moral structure. As Forster describes her experience: "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists; nothing has value." (Forster 127)

This awareness of the relativity of values and the constraints of a solely rational understanding aligns with certain aspects of Eastern philosophy that highlight the deceptive nature of the material world (Maya) and the limitations of the rational intellect. Mrs. Moore's journey encapsulates the broader theme of the novel: the challenges of reconciling fundamentally different worldviews. The narrative suggests that while Western rationalism is beneficial in specific contexts, it ultimately falls short in grasping the complexities of human life and the universe.

"In England, the moon had seemed dead and alien; here she was caught in the shawl of night together with earth and all other stars. A sudden sense of unity, of kinship with the heavenly bodies, passed into the old woman and out, like water through a tank, leaving a strange freshness behind." (Forster 169)

Mrs. Moore's experience in the Marabar Caves poses a significant challenge to her Western perspective. The echo resonating within the caves seems to erase all differences, transforming everything into an empty sound. This encounter undermines the very foundation of her Christian beliefs, which rely on a distinct understanding of right and wrong, as well as good and evil. The uncertainty and apparent meaninglessness of the echo compel her to face the constraints of human logic and the shortcomings of a purely rational view of the cosmos. Her experience foreshadows the postmodern focus on the fluidity of meaning and the relativity of truth.

The Marabar Caves themselves serve as a representation of the enigmatic nature of India and the limitations of Western efforts to classify and comprehend it. The echo within the caves, which obliterates distinctions and renders everything into a senseless "boum," can be seen as a metaphor for the difficulties involved in grasping a knowledge system that operates on principles fundamentally different from Western thought. The caves are not just a physical space but a symbolic realm that encapsulates the mystery and ambiguity of India. As Forster notes, the echo "robbed infinity and eternity of their vastness" (Forster 127), implying that Western notions are insufficient for capturing the true essence of reality as understood through some aspects of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).

The caves can be interpreted as emblematic of the limits of human perception and the ultimate unknowability of the divine. They challenge both the characters and the reader to reconsider their assumptions about the world and confront the boundaries of their own comprehension. The uncertainty surrounding the events in the caves further emphasizes the difficulty of reaching a definitive understanding of reality, a key issue in many philosophical traditions associated with IKS. The caves, with their ancient aura and mystifying character, symbolize India's rich and intricate history, defying simple categorization or explanation.

In addition to its evident philosophical and spiritual inquiries, *A Passage to India* also illustrates various cultural practices and traditions that are deeply connected to IKS. These practices provide insight into the lived reality of IKS and its impact on everyday life. This novel depicts the social interactions within India as well as between Indians and Westerners, particularly during the Colonial period. It gives a realistic depiction of the relationship between Indians and Britishers, as well as among the people of different religions and communities within India.

"I have had twenty-five years experience of this country'—and twenty-five years seemed to fill the waiting room with their staleness and ungenerosity—' and during those twenty-five years, I have never known anything but disaster result when English people and Indians attempt to be intimate socially.'" (Forster 168)

These social interactions also help to expose the chaotic and multi-dimensional network of customs, etiquette, and social expectations that people had, some of which were rooted in the traditional knowledge systems. The themes such as strict social hierarchy followed by the people, importance of hospitality, and '*Atithi devo bhava*' reflect the fundamental principles of IKS.

The novel highlights miscommunication between the Britishers and Indians that often arose due to their separate views on social space and way of interpersonal interaction. While the British believe in maintaining a boundary and being formal, Indians tend to be more friendly and approach with all their heart. This intimacy and interconnectedness, which is rooted in Indian Culture, creates a rift between Indians and Britishers. Britishers are more distant and formal. These distinctions also underscore the cultural embeddedness of knowledge and the challenges of navigating diverse social frameworks. The British inclination to maintain social distance and

adhere to strict etiquette rules is often viewed as cold by the Indians, who prioritize hospitality and personal connections.

The role of music and spiritual practices in Indian culture is emphasized in the "Temple" segment, where singing traditional songs and bhajans collectively during the celebration of Krishna's birth highlights the key role of arts in spiritual expression and community bonding. These artistic customs are essential to IKS, which acknowledges the interrelation of art, spirituality, and knowledge. The complex rhythms, the emotional depth of the songs, and the vivid imagery of the celebration all contribute to fostering a sense of unity and transcendence. In this context, the use of music and art transcends mere aesthetics; it serves as a medium for expressing and embodying spiritual truths. IKS appreciates the capacity of art to stir emotions, ignite the imagination, and create a profound connection with the divine. The devotional music, characterized by intricate melodies and rhythms, cultivates a sense of shared experience, transporting participants to a realm that exceeds the ordinary.

Descriptions of the mosque and the temple as places of worship and community underscore the importance of sacred architecture in Indian culture. These sacred architectures not only serve as a place of worship but also as a store of traditional knowledge regarding the types of design, symbols, and motifs that were used in ancient times to connect humankind and the cosmos. All these have a part in IKS. The design of the mosque is such that it provides space and peace. It also reflects the Islamic values of oneness and single devotion. In comparison to the mosque, the temple has images carved out with all details, imagery that symbolises certain values or history, and holds stories of Hindu mythology. Both these places of worship remind us that IKS is not just confined to texts and abstract concepts but also has a physical manifestation in these forms. It cannot just be felt but also seen and heard. All the sites of pilgrimage and worship are laden with symbolic meanings, architecture, and music, which are known to form a link between the eternal and humans. Despite the contrast that has been made, it has also been emphasized in the text that these religious differences do not mean much because the presence of the divine can be found in both places. This promotes social harmony, which is also one of the preachings of IKS. "That makes no difference. God is here." (Forster 16)

Forster tried to depict India in a positive light with great sensitivity and detailed analysis, but the novel also exposes some difficulties inherent in Indian traditions that Britishers feel because of being from a different culture. They are not able to interpret Indian beliefs and culture well. The colonial background adds to this difficulty by raising questions on authorities in power, representation of Indians by Western eyes, as well as the role of historical contexts in narratives and knowledge systems. Forster had aimed to surpass the cliché depictions, but few critics believe that he still fell into the norm. Although the novel is still viewed within an Oriental framework, it skilfully underlines India's enigma, complexity, and mystery from the perspective of the West. Godbole is the character who symbolizes the spiritual insights, and is viewed as an "othered" figure to reinforce the idea of the "mysterious East". This narrative tries to

establish a connection between East and West, but unintentionally it also asserts the idea of the Orientals as exotic, devoid of logic, and very different from the Occident.

The points of view of the British characters, even those who are more empathetic, like Fielding, are still found to be influenced by their colonial environment unconsciously. They try to see India as it is, but somewhere they are guided by the stereotypes that create doubt in their minds towards Indians. In the process of trying to understand India, they learn more about the shortcomings than the good. Western logic and empirical evidence dominate over the Indian intention and purity. This can also be seen with reference to the concept of "white man's burden". They misinterpret Indian Knowledge Systems because they want to decode them without contextual understanding and an unbiased perspective. "They did not want to be pleasant or unpleasant, but to keep things in compartments." (Forster 109)

The intention of categorising and compartmentalising is one of the features of colonial powers. However, it is totally rejected in Indian Knowledge Systems, which focus on a holistic and interconnected understanding of self as well as the world around. Britishers pay more attention to focus on logic, efficiency, and dominance, which creates conflicts with the more fluid, intuitive, and relational approach of Indian thought. This disparity is evident in interactions between the British characters and the Indian characters. Their thought processes also highlight this disparity, their interpretations of Indian customs, and their response towards the Indian landscape and culture. This approach, which centers only on rationality and objectivity, is not adequate to understand the depth and realize the importance of a knowledge system that prioritizes intuition, spirituality, and interconnectedness.

The challenges of cross-cultural communication and understanding depicted in the novel highlight the obstacles of "translating" knowledge from one cultural framework to another.

"My point is that direct exposure is not privileged over other kinds of exposure but is, rather, always enmeshed with them. What I am saying is that 'Orientalism' as a body of knowledge and as a set of practices was immensely, even uniquely, productive; not merely did it denote a relationship between East and West that the West dominated, but it also presented the 'Orient' in a certain way (or ways) that actual encounters often seemed to confirm." (Said 67)

As Said remarked, the very act of portraying another culture can introduce a level of distortion and misrepresentation. This is especially pertinent when engaging with a complex and layered knowledge system like IKS, which is intricately linked to a specific cultural and linguistic backdrop.

The constraints of language become clear through the characters' attempts to communicate beyond cultural frontiers. Words often fall short in conveying the complete meaning and nuance of concepts that are deeply rooted in a particular cultural and historical context. This is particularly noticeable in discussions surrounding philosophy and spirituality, where abstract ideas are frequently interwoven with specific cultural practices and beliefs. The process of translation, whether linguistic or

cultural, inevitably involves selection, interpretation, and the potential for distortion. This text develops the thought that to really understand a culture and its people, there is a need to be immersed in their cultural milieu as well as an open mind to accept the mysteries and complexities of their world.

The Indian landscape, which is portrayed in this novel through the city of Chandrapore and the Marabar Caves, essentially plays an active role in shaping the characters' experiences and perceptions of India. These settings do not serve only as background to the narrative but also as living characters themselves, which speak to us and hint at the representations of IKS in this text. Chandrapore, with its blend of ancient customs and colonial modernity, signifies the intricate and often contradictory nature of India itself. The city's vibrant energy, its contrasts of beauty and poverty, and its deep historical roots all enhance its symbolic importance. Chandrapore becomes a microcosm of India, reflecting its diversity, contradictions, and enduring spirit.

"The Indian knowledge systems show remarkable tolerance for the other, the *purva paksa*, which is always represented in the tradition of disputation, with a great deal of truth and accuracy before it is contested." (Kapoor 31)

The city's ancient temples and lively bazaars exist alongside symbols of colonial authority, creating a sense of tension and discomfort. The Marabar Caves symbolize the profound enigma and ungraspable ability that resides at the core of existence. Their resonant emptiness confronts the characters' beliefs about reality and compels them to face the boundaries of their own understanding. The caves can also be viewed as a representation of the cyclical essence of time and the fleeting nature of all things, themes that are pivotal to Hindu cosmology. With their ageless presence and mysterious echo, the caves transform into an emblem of the eternal and the inscrutable.

Although *A Passage to India* is set against a colonial backdrop, its examination of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) holds significance in today's world. In our increasingly interconnected and global society, the necessity for cross-cultural awareness and communication has never been more vital. IKS, with its focus on holistic perspectives, interdependence, and the constraints of purely analytical approaches, provides essential insights for navigating the intricacies of the 21st century. *A Passage to India* presents a multifaceted and frequently ambiguous depiction of India and its knowledge frameworks. While the novel does not deliver a comprehensive portrayal of IKS, it engages with several of its fundamental aspects, especially in philosophy, spirituality, and culture. Through its representation of specific characters, locations, and themes, Forster's work uncovers the lasting impact of IKS, as well as the challenges faced in interpreting it within a colonial context. The narrative emphasizes the shortcomings of Western rationalism in fully grasping the holistic and interconnected character of IKS and highlights the difficulties of cross-cultural comprehension in a setting marked by power disparities and historical legacies. The novel's lasting strength lies in its capacity to provoke deep inquiries about the essence of reality, the boundaries of human understanding, and the potential for connection across cultural divides. By delving into the underlying presence of IKS, *A Passage to India* encourages us to re-evaluate our own beliefs and engage in a more open and nuanced discourse with the

world. The novel's exploration of IKS remains pertinent today, also offering valuable perspectives for navigating an ever-complex and interconnected landscape.

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