

Interdisciplinarity as Epistemic Expansion: Contextualizing the Debate in Indian Context

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Interdisciplinarity as a pedagogical and epistemic practice has acquired an added focus, especially with the advent and predominance of postmodern thought and praxis. A contemporary buzzword, though in no way an altogether new phenomenon, interdisciplinarity has become a new *mantra* for the organisation and dissemination of knowledge in institutes of higher learning in India. While this has led to much-needed convergence of disciplines by denting departmental insularities, it also has tended to – wherever it has been adopted mechanically or as an epistemic fashion – obfuscate the disciplinary distinctiveness and focus. Consequently, the debate on and around ‘disciplinarity’, its meaning, purpose and practice, has been underlined by a sense of apocalyptic premonition, cautious optimism, pedagogical holism and epistemic utopianism at the same time. As Joe Moran has averred, today this debate has been marked by an “intense crises of knowledge identity” and has primarily evolved around the problematic of pluralist aspiration versus disciplinary coherence (see *Interdisciplinarity* for details). The contemporary Indian responses to this anxiety too have evolved along with different epistemic positions.

II

The most obvious response that the advocates of interdisciplinarity forward in its defence has a Tennysonian ring to it:

“The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world. “ (Tennyson 416)

They see in interdisciplinarity an evolutionary pedagogical panacea, a continuous convergence of new practices that should replace and replenish the old and the worn out in sync with the demands of the new age and its customs. This idea is beautifully captured and reiterated by Allama Iqbal thus:

*Sach keh doon, Ai Barehman, gar tu buraa na mane
Tere sanamkaddon ke but ho gaye puraane. (Iqbal)*
I’ll tell you the truth, O Brahmin,
if you won’t take offence:
the idols that grace your temples
have ceased to make sense. (Translation by Dalvi Web)

There is yet another epistemic pedagogical position, akin but not similar to the

one referred to above, that roots for change in response to the current knowledge anxiety. The following poetic expression by Jaun Elia, a Pakistani poet, best captures the existential ontological contours of this position:

Kya hai jo badal gayi hai duniya
Mein bhi to bahut badal gaya hoon.
Why rue if the world has changed
Haven't I too changed a lot with time. (Elia 80)

Drawing inferences from Elia's poetic insight, it can be said that knowledge construction, acquisition, and dissemination being functions of their moment, man and milieu, are amenable to change with the changes in these variables. The changing textures and structures of the knowledge mutate the nature of its understanding and, as a corollary, one's response to it requires a commensurate refit with the change. Interdisciplinarity, as a dominant praxis of our times helps realize that necessary knowledge refits.

The third interdisciplinarity manoeuvre derives its rationale from the idea of knowledge as 'historical palimpsest.' It is intricately wedded to a pluralist understanding of the self and the social. The advocates of this position envision any given knowledge domain in complementary terms, i.e., every discipline of necessity contains within it the echoes of others and that no knowledge is autonomous, enclosed or complete by itself. Each discipline is merely a stage, a transition from particular to general wherein one discipline 'diffuses' into the other to create a larger whole:

Meri-hasti-mein-tu bhi-shamil-hai
Tu-nahi-to-hai-kya-vajood-mera.
You too add to my identity
Without you what am I? (Self-composed)

This idea gives due cognizance to the variegated 'past-ness' of the knowledge domain and understands it as a historicised inter and intra-disciplinary truth. Once Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, was asked to explain his identity. He had replied that he was thousands year old Pashtun, hundreds year old Muslim and only decades-old Pakistani – he was a cumulative outcome of his past and present. So is the case with any knowledge discipline and its sedimentation through time. It continuously diverges from and converges into new knowledge configurations in time.

There is yet another interdisciplinary-epistemic understanding that, cutting through the disciplinary boundaries, celebrates the inherently democratic, almost multicultural dissemination of disciplines in all their distinct yet symbiotic reciprocity. It roots for a simultaneous effervescence of ideas where one does

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not negate or is insulated from the other but comes together and co-exists in due recognition of each other's particularity or distinctiveness:

chaman meñ ikhtilât-e-rañg-o-bû se baat bantî hai
ham hî ham haiñ to kyâ ham haiñ tum hî tum ho to kyâ tum ho.
(Sailani web)

The garden gets its meaning in the intermingling of smells and hues
If one is, and the other is not, the garden simply cannot exist.

There, however, do exist views that contradict, oppose and challenge the rationale of interdisciplinarity as knowledge garnering praxis. One such position within this epistemic category holds that all disciplines are distinct in their knowledge curvatures and hence 'possess,' and need to traverse their unique paths, *dharmas* and destinations and that each one of these needs to keep its individual aspirations and enclosures intact. The epistemic-ontological essence of this argument is best expressed in Nizamuddin Auliya's poetic-spiritual wisdom thus:

Har-qaum-raast-raahe, deene-va-qibalagaahe
Man-qibla, raast-kardam-bar-simte-qaz-qulahe. (Bahraich 73)
Each community has its truth path, *dharma*, and destination
But even within this we have individual inspirations intact. (Translation by self)

The above postulates and positions notwithstanding, the epistemic-pedagogical contentions that revolve around interdisciplinarity have not been resolved conclusively in favour of any one take so far. Most of us still continue to tread the convenient pedagogical routes that tend to whimsically cut through the "pluralist aspirations" of any knowledge and its anxiety for "disciplinary coherence." In the vein of Daag Dehlvi, a prominent Urdu poet, one keeps on oscillating from one epistemic-pedagogical position to another without knowing or realising how or where to arrive at in one's quest for knowledge acquisition and dissemination:

kaabe kî hai havas kabhî kû-e-butâñ kî hai
mujh ko 3habar nahîñ mirî miTTî kahâñ kî hai. (Dehlvi web)

III

The contemporary pedagogical scenario, especially under the onslaught of postmodern ethos has, nevertheless, tended to shift its epistemic locus towards interdisciplinarity. The knowledge spaces of our times are marked by and betray 'interdisciplinary anxiety'. It is immediately visible in the ways conventional literature departments are being rechristened or their course-curricula are being

designed, debated and revised. All these epistemic or knowledge building manoeuvres/gestures have come to be mediated by extra-academic considerations – part political, part commercial, part contextual and part fashionable.

In the past few years, especially in the wake of postmodern thought taking the centre stage and LPG (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) mediating all educational sites and insight, there has been an upsurge in market-mediated, multi-skill courses that are being offered by the institutions of higher learning. The interdisciplinary courses like MBA, ICT (Information and Communication Technology), Bio-Medical Engineering or Engineering Physics that are currently in fashion, happen to be the off-springs of market-oriented and technologically driven epistemic *weltanschauung*. Their upsurge and consequent downslide – unlike conventional disciplines – is a function of the vagaries of the market. Most of these have been devised as courses wherein skills were given preference over knowledge-making or wisdom, knowledge packaging became more important than knowledge acquisition, and core competence was sacrificed at the altar of horizontal cross-breeding across disciplines. As a consequence, the resultant epistemic action shifted from the basic to the applied, from the fundamentals to functionality, from the centre to the margins and ‘core competences’ were redefined and compromised in the pursuit of knowledge ‘hybridity’ and the idea of inclusiveness was hijacked by the idea of utility. The fact that interdisciplinarity as knowledge praxis works better at the margin to reinforce the core was conveniently forgotten.

The current race for the convergence of diverse knowledge has put undue pressure on conventional Humanities and Social Sciences departments to reinvent and update themselves. They have responded to this crisis through strategies that have not always been knowledge conducive. One of the ways this pressure was sought to be offloaded was by rechristening the departments in tune with the knowledge spirit of the times. Departments of English, for example, were ‘renovated’ as Department of English and Cultural Studies or Department of English and Foreign Languages with an obvious aim to move away from their disciplinary limitations and inter-departmental insulation to the so-called interdisciplinary inclusiveness.

The epistemic spaces thus reinvented also required a commensurate curricula refit. In most literature departments this refitting paved the way for knowledge amorphousness in the name of cross-disciplinary enrichment. All kinds of ‘studies’ – film studies, media studies, cultural studies, ethical and moral studies, environmental studies, to name a few – have come to piggy ride on ‘literary studies’. As a result, literature and its pursuit have acquired what

may be termed as ‘gunny-sack syndrome’ – just fill the sack of literature with any ‘study’ and it still remains a sack of literature.

The question of ‘what to teach’ and ‘why to teach that’ – or in other words what to include and what to exclude from the syllabi – too often turns into an extra-academic game of ideological one-up-man-ship. The academic-epistemic deliberations are reduced into a zero-sum game of political proclivities. The political parochialism is turned into an ethical stance and an academic insight to push one’s political agenda in the name of literature. As a consequence, literariness or literature as interdisciplinary epistemic and pedagogical value is vulgarised and is made subservient to the dominant power-as-‘the’ literary-gaze. Even if one concedes that knowledge-economies have always been mediated by power matrices of their respective times, it hardly validates those extreme practices that tend to mechanically decide the literary-epistemic worth of a ‘text’ merely in terms of its political hue. Such political posturing does not serve the cause of interdisciplinarity, let alone the spirit of a discipline. The idea of interdisciplinarity *inter alia* draws its justification from the fact that no text can be subjected to unilateral or absolute interpretation. This pedagogical idea calls for a co-existence of ‘reading-cosmopolitanisms’ and ‘interpretive pluralities’ even in those texts that may on the face of it seem politically antagonist to any given ideological dispensation.

The interdisciplinarity – both as an idea and praxis – thus, not only means cutting across disciplines but also recognising and respecting the inherent plurality of any text or knowledge domain. It also demands a critical and creative recognition of every single discipline as an open-ended and unbiased pursuit for knowledge. Though interdisciplinarity helps expand the cognitive boundaries of a discipline, but if practiced uncritically or non-creatively or for extra-disciplinary considerations, it has the potential to derail the very epistemic impetus.

IV

Then how should the Departments of Literature map their interdisciplinary routes? What possible paradigms and possibilities literature as a discipline *per se* makes available to its practitioners? As a literary praxis and a cognitive concept, interdisciplinarity can be employed gainfully to address some of the issues implicit in these questions.

As a knowledge domain, literature is unique in that it straddles across all other disciplines through its imaginative, narrative and discursive sweeps. Literature both draws from life and transcends it creatively and as such becomes a fit receptacle and carrier of interdisciplinary potentials that cut across fact and fiction, the lived and the thought. This unique ability of literature to subsume

within its narrative flux ‘the possible and the probable’ of life through its uniquely endowed imaginative-meditative reflexivity is but another way of knowledge creation. As such literature becomes and remains an ever new and overarching discipline where disciplinary boundaries blur into other disciplines to create knowledge cusps and interdependencies. This idea of literature as an inclusive but a uniquely endowed inter-discipline that continuously reveals itself anew may be gleaned and reiterated through the following poetic expressions thus:

*hazâr baar zamâna idhar se guzrâ hai
na.î na.î sî hai kuchh terî rahguzar phir bhî. (Gorakhpuri 32)*
This path has been oft travelled
Yet each traversal offers something new.(Translation by self)

*ham jis pe mar rahe haiñ vo hai baat hî kuchh aur
aalam meñ tujh se laakh sahî tû magar kahâñ. (Hali 9)*
The one we crave for is unique to itself

The world abounds in its likeness but can never be it. (Translation by self)

*naqshe-e-surat ko mitta kar ashna maani ka ho
katra bhi dariya hai jo dariya mein shamil ho gaya. (Aatish web)*

Forget the features and appearances, seek the meaning instead A drop that merges in the river, is a river itself.

What makes interdisciplinary pedagogical praxis as amenable to literary teaching and understanding as discipline, thus, springs from its inherent interdisciplinarity both at the level of its production and reception. This unique endowment of literature comes to the fore the moment we are faced with questions such as: Is literature/story possible without society? What is society if not a narrative/story at a certain level? As a contested cross-section of cognitive and communicative networks and discourses can literature be anything but interdisciplinary?

As a teaching discipline, literature has always enabled the convergence of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives under its rubric. This diversity and convergence constitute the disciplinary spectrum of literature across University syllabi and foregrounds literariness as an integrated, integrative, and interrogative narrative and cognitive domain. Literary narratives, in their ‘truth

components' not only emerge as ways of thinking, emoting and reasoning but also as modes of inquiry into the nature of knowledge, reality and life. It is not without reason that any cognitive foray in India would begin with the communicative-narrative rider – “Let me tell you a story . . .” In short, it is the story that provides an ‘originary’ cognitive moment and a movement to an average Indian to organise and explain complex matters of life and learning.

It is through the coming together of the imaginative and the theoretical as a seamless cognitive tool that literature builds within itself another interdisciplinary possibility. This ‘convergence’ of theory and the story, or this ‘intra and inter’ disciplinary possibilities enter literature through a simple epistemic manoeuvre that may be delineated as: when life enters a narrative it becomes a story; when life is shaken out of the narrative it becomes criticism; and when story and criticism evolve into life perspectives across disciplines, it becomes theory. However, this wedding of theory and story needs a delicate cognitive handling to emerge as an enabling pedagogical tool. It requires reading a story as theory and in turn transforming a theoretical sight into a story. Theory, even if its roots lie outside literature, can open up an interdisciplinary window in the house of literature. Comparative Literary and Translation Studies provide literature with such interdisciplinary windows. Since comparative pedagogies open cross-language and cross-cultural possibilities for literatures, these learning possibilities – in transporting stories across languages and culture – help tame ‘globalisation’ as a multi-cultural and multi-dialogical possibility and praxis within literature.

Further, literary studies cannot happen in a vacuum, they have to be carried out within a context that is in sync with the spatio-temporality of its episteme reception. As such literature departments have to transcend the ‘Flat Syndrome’ they have created around themselves in order to realize in their pedagogies the universality – their essential epistemic value – of their respective universities and that of the discipline *per se*. However, they also need to realise that interdisciplinarity is only possible at the fringes of disciplinary boundaries where transitions usually take place and need to be accounted for with some kind of epistemic responsibility and pedagogical maturity. As Departments of English, they cannot continue to bask in their the old glories which are often epistemic residues of colonial hangovers but need to open their windows to other disciplines in a manner and through such pedagogical strategies that they are not blown off their epistemic grounds. While they need to keep the core of their discipline intact, they also need to assimilate the new or the other within their epistemic fold. One way to achieve this objective would be by establishing inter-departmental dialogues, creating interdisciplinary interfaces, and forge relationships of proximity with old and new knowledge domains. This strategy would not only help English departments to update themselves pedagogically

but also help them create new knowledge or at least customise the old in sync with the spirit and requirement of times.

However, this creative potential of interdisciplinarity seems to have been subverted by Indian academic hinterland. The way the idea of interdisciplinarity has been practised in the classroom and incorporated into the research trajectories of English Departments leaves much to be desired for its execution as a nuanced learning praxis. At times interdisciplinarity has been turned into an onslaught on the very idea of literature. Consequently, within such academic spaces one tends to end up doing everything in the name of literature, but literature. The PhD research being conducted in these departments has tended to reduce literature into mere data, at best a mechanical case study or extension of theory, history or sociology. Instead of helping retain the spirit of literature or reaffirm its identity, such studies turn it into an epistemic colony up for grab by other disciplines. Such research forays end up vandalising the spirit of literature both as a discipline and an interdiscipline. They fail to understand the nature and importance of literary imagination. They fail to distinguish between history and historical consciousness, between fact and fiction, between truth and reality, and between psychology *per se* and psychological insight as creative prerequisites that have a bearing on the very essence of literature and literary manoeuvres such as characterization, plot development and the narrative build-up. Interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary study and research is relevant and of significance only if it complements disciplinary sensibility and helps create cognitive interfaces rather than a desire for disciplinary appropriation. A man of literature needs to teach Bhakti Poetry not as a religious text but as a poetic testament of its and our times. To read it as an extra-literary text would amount to misappropriating it within the literary praxis.

V

Literature in itself is a contested cognitive space with its own aesthetic and activist complexities. It can neither be a substitute for other disciplines, nor can it be substituted by other disciplines. However, by the very nature of its poetics and aesthetics, it becomes a very creative medium for dialogic and symbiotic interfaces with other disciplines. These potentials can enable pedagogical inter-practices by recognising cross-disciplinary importance of literary reading and cognitive practices. One such interdisciplinary route lies in investing its literary equipment – as a way to nuanced and layered reading/understanding – in other disciplines to enhance in them the pleasure of reading, the aesthetics of writing and the critical engagement with the rigours of imagination, thought and perspectives. The other could be traced through the recognition of literariness and literary knowledge as a complex interaction of *Ukta* (What has been said?),

Anukta (What has not been said?) and *Durukta* (What lacks clarity?), and the use of these insights for reading narratives that may belong to other knowledge domains. A close reading of the text for hidden meaning or deeper resonances – a usual reading practice in literature – enables alternate readings of any given text outside literature. It also helps recognise and harness the ‘collective meaning-making potentialities’ of literature and investing Social Science disciplines with these reading insights. It helps align the literary with the Social Science epistemologies in/as context-text-reader or pre-text-post continuum. This continuum finds its validation from the fact that if there is a story before a story and after it, there is also a history before and after any given history. Turning the potentials of a story into reading praxis for narratives which do not belong to the literary domain endow these other narratives with a transformative epistemic potential.

Literature and its praxis, thus, makes available pedagogical trajectories wherein information is processed into knowledge, knowledge is aimed at wisdom and wisdom is in the service of truth. Literary insights enlighten one to the fact that truth does not reside in the facts alone, it lies at the intersection of fact and fiction – and literature is a commensurate disciplinary receptacle for this liminal and multiple play of truth. It is this intersection that makes any experience both interdisciplinary and whole in literature.

VI

The contemporary literary corpus abounds in interdisciplinary imagination and creative practices. Science Fiction, Graphic Novels, Dalit Literature, Feminist Literature, Post-Colonial Literature, Protest Literature, Historical Fiction – all emerge from and depend on interdisciplinary insights for their creation and consumption as literature. These literary insights, besides challenging the conventional and outmoded systems of creative imagination and critical thought, enables one to produce innovative pedagogical methodologies that open up the existing literary notions for examination through new perspectives. But an uncritical acceptance of this literary praxis may be a bad idea. Disciplinary grounding remains a prerequisite for interdisciplinary competence.

However, there would always be a need for a reflexive form of interdisciplinarity that recognizes its own limitations and artificiality. There would always be a need to transform the disciplines, encourage communication between them or use them to create new intellectual configurations or alliances. Interdisciplinarity, thus, needs to evolve into a way of living with the disciplines more critically and self-consciously, recognizing that their most basic assumptions can always be challenged or reinvigorated by new ways of thinking from elsewhere. It is also a recognition of the fact that truth is not the patent of any

one discipline and that all disciplines need to continuously engage with the question ‘the why and what of the knowledge’. And interdisciplinarity should also help us realise the wisdom of an epistemic enigma that postulates that though the parts (here specific disciplines) constitute a whole, yet it is the whole that is always greater than its parts.

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