Hegemony has been described by Antonio Gramsci (1971, p. 12) as “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is historically caused by the prestige which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.” In the last four hundred years of global transformation to capitalism as a system, the West has acquired a hegemonic status.

In the last fifty years of marketing thought in India, the hegemony of the West is strongly evident. The hegemonic status manifests itself in three significant ways in the discipline. First, it reduces the possibility of independent work within the discipline and confines it to a subordinate position of the mainstream scholarship in the West. Second, it fails to engage with past marketing practices in the country and becomes a discipline that is ahistorical. Third, borrowing from the mainstream academic concerns of the West, Indian marketing thought becomes an exclusive zone of engagement that overlooks its vast subaltern population.

My analysis of marketing thought in India helps to uncover the role of postcolonial epistemic ideology in shaping the discipline. I interpret postcolonial epistemic ideology as ideas about knowledge claims in a discipline that arise out of the material structure of a society with a colonial past in which the disciplinary space is embedded (Varman & Saha, 2009). I elaborate on these three areas in the rest of this writing.

**CHALLENGE OF DEPENDENCE**

On the question of dependency, we need to attend to some important systemic underpinnings that create this position. According to Foucault (1977, p. 222), the unequal functioning of the global bourgeois society requires, “systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines.” In Foucault’s (1977) interpretation, one of the objectives of a disciplinary process is to produce docile subjects that the disciplining institutions can observe, segregate, normalize, and control. Thus, Foucault (1977, p. 170) contends, “the chief function of the disciplinary...
power is to ‘train’...it seeks to bind them together in such a way as to multiply and use them.” Here, knowledge is not value-free and is an important part of the ideological apparatus that operates through academic institutions. This understanding helps to focus on the disciplinary processes through which marketing discipline in India is made into an appendage of the mainstream Western knowledge system and then operates as a docile academic body (Varman & Saha, 2009).

Postcolonial theorists have argued that Eurocentric prescriptions in Indian education systems have played an important role in this process of disciplining (e.g. Srivastava, 1994; Viswanathan, 1987). Accordingly, colonizers closely segregated and controlled the dissemination of Western knowledge as a system of thought to govern effectively. Postcolonial theorists often support their analyses by citing Macaulay’s (1835/2006, p. 375) thesis on colonial education according to which, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Partha Chatterjee (1989, p. 623) concurs with this interpretation of the disciplining process and observes that, “underlying each option was a colonial belief that in the end Indians must come to believe in the unworthiness of their traditional customs and embrace the new forms of a civilized and rational social order.”

The most significant part of the origins of formal education and research in marketing can be traced back to the establishment of the Indian Institutes of Management at Calcutta and Ahmedabad in 1961. These IIMs have played an instrumental role in shaping the nature of marketing education and research in India. They were established with the collaboration of Ford Foundation and had initial mentorship arrangements with Harvard Business School and the Alfred Sloan School of Management respectively (IIM Calcutta, 2012). The objectives of these collaborations with the US universities were clearly to ensure that teachers and teaching in these new institutions were guided by the business school model prevalent in that country (Varman & Saha, 2009; Varman & Sreekumar, forthcoming).

Under this arrangement, the Sloan School deputed two of its faculty members as consultants for the Marketing area at IIM Calcutta who served as mentors for the group (IIM Calcutta, 2012). A large scale import of books from the US under the aegis of Ford Foundation followed and it meant that from the very early stages, a dependence on the teaching devices from the West became entrenched. Instructors were expected to deploy these imported books as texts and references in their pedagogical and research processes. A historical account of the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta (IIM Calcutta, 2012) describes the experiences of Lakshmi Mohan, one of the earliest teachers of Marketing in India. In this account, Mohan shares his dilemma over prescribing Kotler’s text book to his marketing class in 1965 (ibid, p. 113). Apart from the dependence on the US text, Mohan’s narrative underpins another important feature of the early years of marketing thought in India that subsequently got further reinforced.

The marketing thought in India was guided by the prevailing business institutions in the US as they were captured in popular texts such as that of Kotler. Although the structures of the two economies were different, the dominant model imported from the US primarily attended to large corporations and did not delve into the overwhelming presence of small/medium manufactures, agriculture, and informal service economy in the country (for a detailed description of this aspect refer to Varman & Sreekumar, forthcoming).

The creation of these docile agents through an ideological process of normalization was of significance in the very foundation of management education in India and the process was aided by the Ford Foundation in the immediate post-independence period (Varman & Saha, 2009). The foundation restricted its financial support to activities such as provision of a few US management consultants to Government of India, establishment of All India Management Association (AIMA) to integrate the regional associations that were then operational in a few cities, organizing a short-term Advanced Management Programme through AIMA that was staffed fully by the US faculty, and by sponsoring Indian faculty to participate in faculty development programmes in some US universities (Varman & Saha, 2009).

Marketing thought in India, to borrow from Bourdieu (1990), witnessed “symbolic violence,” through which the West became the only legitimate social reference for modernity and progress. According to Bourdieu (1990), the contemporary world witnesses more of symbolic manipulation than physical violence through which power manifests and control is exercised. In Indian marketing
thought, the Western influence has fulfilled this function of epistemic control through symbolic power that has made the local context unworthy and unnecessary for scholarly inquiries. Thus, the West with its symbolic system fulfills a political function of subordinating the local setting and its varied institutions. In this process, marketing thought is filtered and disseminated by a small set of experts in elite management schools who legitimize themselves through linkages with the West. As Spivak (1987, p. 166-167) argues, these docile actors are trained by the West to perform “in the interest of capital to preserve the comprador theatre” (see Varman & Saha, 2009).

A large part of the research produced by our business schools continues to borrow theoretical constructs and research problems from the West. The Eurocentric approach to theory development causes researchers to focus on problems that are current in Western management literature but of limited relevance to the Indian context. A large part of the analysis of the Indian context is done through mainstream frameworks developed in the West, such as Hofstede’s framework, CETSCALE, and SERVQUAL (Varman & Sreekumar, forthcoming). This is characterized by original search happening in the West, which is then applied to our context with some attempt to localize or what I see as re-search. This further reminds me of Morris’ (1990, p. 10) observation that what we do here is, “something which has already happened elsewhere, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content,” or “the project of positive unoriginality.” Devices such as scales, questionnaires, text books, cases, and articles from the West materialize postcolonial epistemic ideology (see also, Althusser, 1971; Eagleton, 1991). These devices create pre-packaged processes of teaching and research that perpetuate dependency on the West (see also, Chatterjee, 1989; Freire, 1990; Illich, 1971).

I concur with Walter Mignolo’s (2012) observation that the West works as a silent referent for the rest of the world. Any theoretical engagement in the Rest can only legitimate itself by engaging with the West. To paraphrase Dipesh Chakrabarty (1997), western scholars produce their work in relative ignorance of non-western markets, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that we cannot return. We cannot even afford an equality or symmetry of ignorance without taking the risk of being dismissed as ill-informed. Therefore, there is a problem of what Chakrabarty (1997, p. 265) calls, “asymmetric ignorance” and he further poses some important questions,

The everyday paradox of third world social science is that we find these [western] theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of us, eminently useful in understanding our societies. What allowed the modern European sages to develop such clairvoyance with regard to societies of which they are empirically ignorant? Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze?

It is important to add that I am not suggesting that theories developed in the West have no relevance for non-western contexts. We live in a world that is more interconnected than ever before and global capitalism has some important universalizing tendencies that require common frameworks of understanding. As Chibber (2013) has so very skillfully argued, we need to understand the logic of universals before we look into the specificities of our context. However, we need to also understand that in the last three hundred years, capitalism has spread into uneven socio-economic territories and has created high levels of heterogeneity across the world. The resulting heterogeneous world of capitalist domination and colonialism has been primarily and erroneously interpreted through the logic of mainstream Western theories.

This is where we need to closely look at some of the theories at the margins in the West and here I am referring to the critical tradition. This also takes away the canonical status that we have given to some narrowly situated Western theories. We should deploy this alternate tradition along with our own local agenda, priorities, theories, and understanding and hybridize the dominant knowledge system. This is a process that possibly subverts the hegemony of the West. As Bhabha (1994) has argued, this hybridity leads to a discursive process of strategic reversal in which knowledge created by authority is combined with other forbidden forms of knowledge and is used by the colonized to challenge colonial power. This opens spaces for the colonized to subvert the master-discourse (Loomba, 2005).

ELISION OF ITS PAST AND INSTITUTIONS

As a result of the dependence on the West, Indian marketing thought from the sixties developed a tendency to not engage with its institutions that were different from those in the West. Marketing theory in India has primarily revolved around large private corporations in the country.
This neglect is driven by a specific discourse of modernity as it has prevailed in this context. After gaining independence, India embarked on a project of large scale industrialization.

This project was believed to be India’s path to modernity and progress. In this discourse, large corporations were viewed as a panacea to the problem of socio-economic backwardness.

Management education was seen as an important part of the discourse of modernity. Westfall and Boyd Jr. (1960), writing on marketing systems in India, identify several domains in need of modernization. They propose that “marketing is probably the least developed aspect of the Indian economy,” and suggest that “modern techniques” are needed to improve the system (ibid, p. 11). However, as we have shown, this dawning of modernity did not produce a free and liberated academic space. Instead, we are reminded of Chatterjee’s (1997, p. 14) observation that, “history of our modernity has been intertwined with the history of colonialism.”

In the process of accepting mainstream marketing theories from outside, the newly converted marketing academics proceeded to neglect the history of India’s markets and businesses. This created an oversight of the past and silence on marketing by a large set of players in India, such as small entrepreneurs, artisans, traders, informal sector service providers, small retailers, and farmers, who did not conform to the prevailing institutional arrangements in the US. One of the most important commercial institutions of the past that continues to dominate the contemporary Indian context is that of bazaar. From its inception, marketing as a formal discipline has largely ignored the institution of bazaar that continues to account for the largest set of transactions in almost every sector of the consumer economy in India. In the process, the discipline has also glossed over some important historical categories that continue to strongly influence markets in India. One such category is of merchant communities that control Indian markets. We know that commercial activity in India has historically been dominated by merchant communities such as Banias, Marwaries, Khattris, and Parsis among others. Writings in India in the domains of economic and business history have actively accounted for the role of communities and their socio-cultural contexts in shaping markets in the country (e.g. Tripathi, 2011). These communities were not merely divided along the caste lines and the idea of merchant community in the country was much broader and worked through its own notions of morality, trust, justice, and honour. However, the scholarship in marketing has remained silent on these alternate institutions, markets, and moral economies (Varman & Sreekumar, forthcoming).

Thus, the double enunciation of the mainstream Eurocentric discursive approach privileges the West through its mystification and denigrates the rest through distorted representations (see also Bhabha, 1994; Freire, 1990). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) observe that national intellectual fields can have “passers” or carriers who dehistoricize concepts that have been developed in particular societies and contexts and propagate them. In a similar fashion, the research communities in marketing in India serve as translators and conduits to transfer management theories and concepts from primarily the United States, and sometimes Europe to India (for a more detailed analysis of this theme see Varman & Sreekumar, forthcoming).

IGNORING ITS SUBALTERN

Another significant element evident in our academy is the silencing of ‘millions’ who are governed through knowledge generation processes. According to Fanon (1967, p. 32), colonizer’s narrative, “dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly turns him into an animal.” In the absence of their ability to become human, natives are stripped of a dialogical status. I use the term subaltern to refer to the economically marginalized groups such as urban proletariat, peasants, etc. (Varman, 2011).

Most research papers in marketing in India reflect managerial concerns of profit maximization and largely ignore consumer welfare and societal issues. This closely resonates with Tadajewski’s (2010) observation that much of marketing theory in the US reflects its narrow corporate interests (see Eckhardt, Dholakia, & Varman, 2013). Even in domains where consumer welfare or subaltern interest is explicitly involved, the findings are often filtered through the hegemonic corporate lens, and local contexts are abstracted out or silenced in the research. For example, there are papers and MBA and executive training courses on the Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP). In these, BOP interventions are seen as simultaneous means of poverty alleviation and corporate profitability. The problems of poverty faced by the poor are not sufficiently ex-
amined, and the BOP concept is celebrated as a route to empowerment for subaltern groups. They fail to illustrate that profit-making motives pursued by corporations using the BOP concept can often conflict with the interests of subaltern stakeholders, and exacerbate their problems (Varman, Skalen, & Belk, 2012). These interpretations of the subaltern scenario are not sufficiently taken into account in the marketing thought in the country (Varman & Sreekumar, forthcoming).

To sum up, symbolic violence silences subaltern groups by distancing pedagogical and research processes from local settings in the Third World (Bourdieu, 1990). Postcolonial epistemic ideology ensures that subaltern groups, local realities, indigenous knowledge, and past experiences of the Third World are enclosed and silenced in marketing discourse (Spivak, 1988). The marketing research community in India take on the role of translators and instead of being knowledge-producers, act as ‘knowledge-peddlers’. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p. 4) state, “Every power to exert symbolic violence, i.e. every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force, adds its own specifically symbolic force to those power relations.” The discipline remains silent on the long history of markets and marketing practices in India and primarily confines itself to narrowly defined problems that concern large corporations. As a consequence, marketing thought in India lacks in local relevance and is still an appendage of the West.

REFERENCES


Varman, R., & Saha, B. (2009). Disciplining the discipline: Understanding postcolonial epistemic ideology in mar-

VIKALPA • VOLUME 39 • NO 2 • APRIL - JUNE 2014


Rohit Varman is a Professor of Marketing at Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. He is a Ph.D from University of Utah and an MBA from McGill University. His research interests are broadly in the fields of Critical Marketing and Consumer Culture Theory. He has published his research in some of the top international management journals that include *Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Retailing, and Organization Science*. He serves on the editorial boards of *Journal of Macromarketing and Consumption, Markets, and Culture*.

e-mail: rohit@iimcal.ac.in
