Why We No Longer Argue

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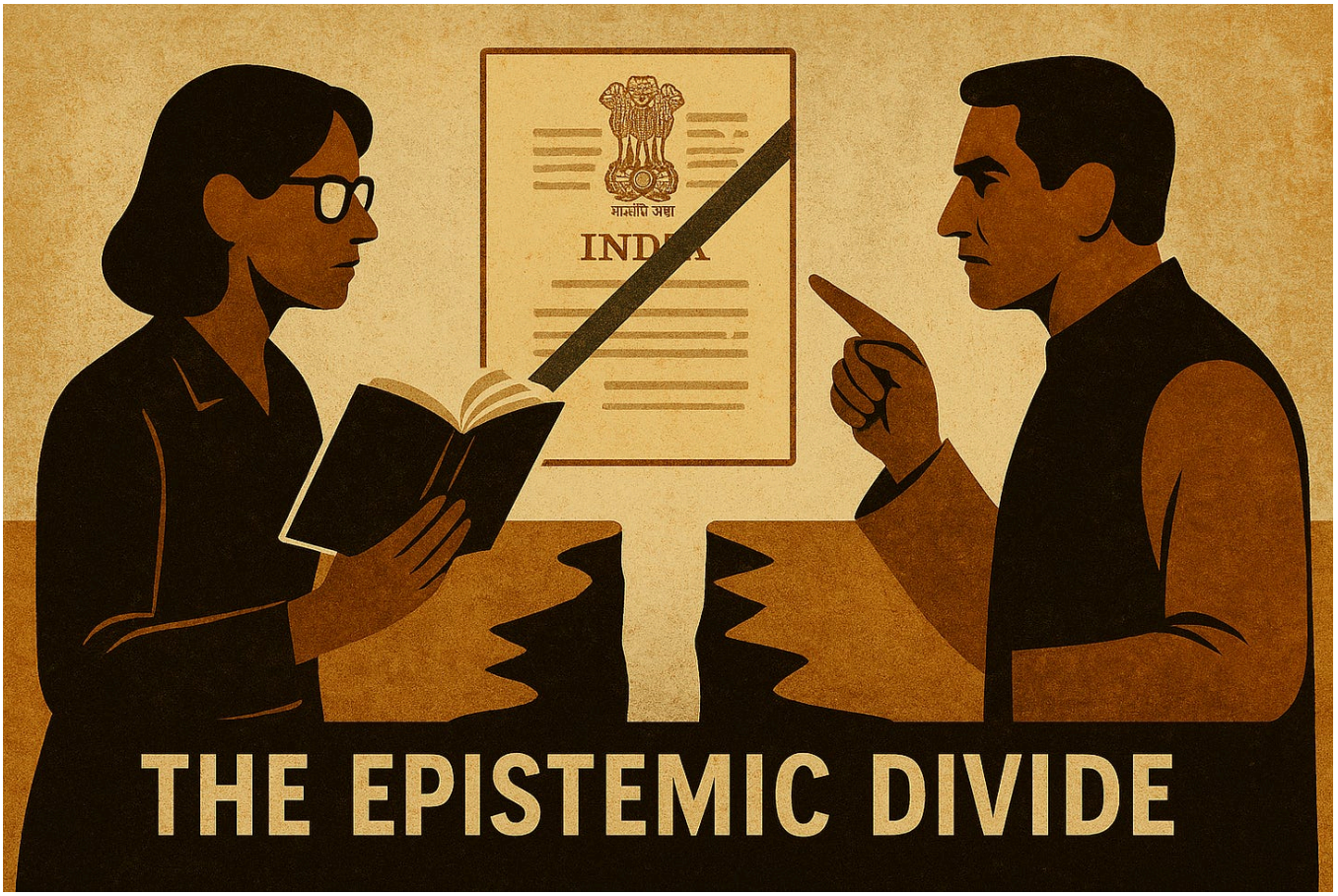
Rohith Jyothish October 25, 2025



The Broken Conversation

Last week, Francesca Orsini, a British scholar of Hindi literature was denied entry into India. The reactions have been divided along the now-familiar lines. For one group, the event symbolised the shrinking space for academic freedom and a government increasingly hostile to critical thought. For another, it was an assertion of sovereignty—a small act of epistemic self-defence against decades of western dominance in the study of Indian culture. Each side saw the other's outrage as proof of hypocrisy.

Yet this was not really a debate about immigration or national security. It was a struggle over who gets to interpret India. Beneath the indignation lay an older anxiety: who has the authority to produce knowledge about India? The fight was not over facts, but over **the right to describe reality**.

That is a much deeper fracture. We no longer argue about evidence. We argue about who is entitled to make an argument at all.

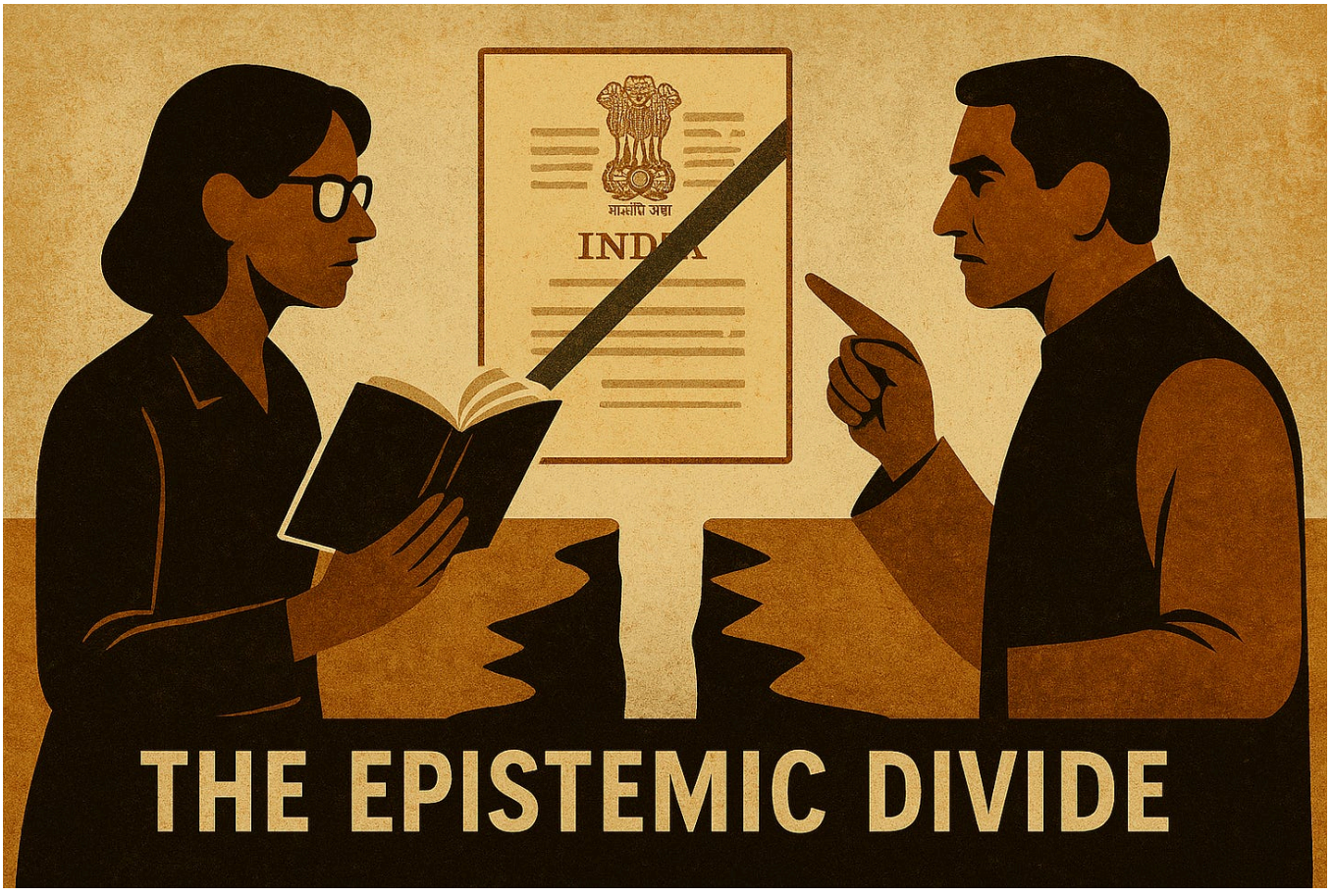
The Epistemic Divide

Today's ideological divides are, at heart, **epistemological divides**. Who gets to speak about society, and on what terms?

The expert appeals to method, rigour, and verification. The nationalist appeals to authenticity, rootedness, and lived belonging. Each believes they are defending truth. But their criteria of truth don't overlap.

You can see this fracture in multiple places. In rewriting of NCERT textbooks under the banner of "decolonisation"; in the suspicion directed at foreign scholars such as Francesca Orsini or Audrey Truschke; in the dismissal of critical economists as "anti-national"; and the growing distrust of journalists who question official data. Even scientific or developmental debates such as those in climate or population are also recast as contests between Western alarmism and Indian optimism.

In each of these cases, expertise itself becomes alien, while national pride masquerades as a form of knowledge. What ought to be an argument about ideas is now a competition between **different moral grammars**.



> *Image: generated by ChatGPT, October 2025*

Resentment as Epistemology

What looks like anti-intellectualism is often something more complicated, a **resentment of exclusion**, expressed as resistance to elitism. Many middle-class professionals—engineers, doctors, bureaucrats, or business folks—experience the languages of the social sciences as foreign, even hostile. Academic critique, sounds, to them, like condescension. Their own expertise is tangible and productive; they build things, heal bodies, manage systems. By contrast, social theory appears to them as indulgence, a ritual of privilege rather than labour.

This resentment is not unjustified. The social sciences in India often do reproduce colonial hierarchies. Researchers write for readers in London rather than their neighbours in Lucknow, and global prestige often outweighs local relevance. The right wing translates this resentment into a political idiom, portraying the university as a closed club of “westernised” elites. The liberal side, meanwhile, treats this reaction as philistinism or populist hysteria. Both miss the point. Beneath the noise lies the same wound—the decay of a common moral authority.

No institution—not the university, the newspaper, nor the peer-reviewed journal—commands public legitimacy beyond suspicion. When the authority of knowledge is itself in doubt, **resentment becomes a way of knowing**. To distrust the expert becomes a moral stance, a defence of dignity.

The Institutional Life of Distrust

Distrust is no longer just a sentiment. It now organises how knowledge is governed. The state, the university, and the media together sustain what might be called an **economy of suspicion**—a system in which uncertainty and doubt are not just by-products but resources.

Within the university, this economy takes bureaucratic form. Every syllabus, project, or conference is subject to vetting framed as administrative prudence but functioning as ideological filtration. “Alignment with national priorities” has replaced intellectual curiosity as a criterion of legitimacy. Departments internalise the logic, self-censoring to appear neutral. Dissent no longer needs punishment. Paperwork performs it quietly.

In the media, the logic is similar. Newsrooms once saw their duty as confronting power. Now they survive by anticipating its displeasure. Concentrated ownership by corporate houses dependent on state contracts blurs the line between business risk and editorial judgment. The result is self-censorship through market discipline. The question is no longer *what’s true*, but *what’s safe to air*.

Suspicion no longer merely questions authority. It becomes the medium through which authority operates. The circulation of contradictory truths produces a strange equilibrium—neither full belief nor disbelief, but a suspended state of vigilance. In this equilibrium, governance relies on doubt just as markets rely on demand. The more uncertainty it generates, the more it can regulate.

This is not classical censorship. It is the management of uncertainty. The flood of information via television panels, social media clips, and WhatsApp forwards produces not knowledge but fatigue. The more people hear, the less they believe. Under such conditions, suspicion feels like prudence, and cynicism, passes for wisdom.

Even the slogan of “decolonising knowledge” is caught in this loop. Instead of widening intellectual exchange, it often narrows it—from questioning *how* knowledge is produced to policing *who* is allowed to produce it. The vocabulary of sovereignty becomes a language of control.

What binds these institutions together is a shared anxiety over legitimacy. Knowledge is valued not for its truth but for its loyalty. Authority is measured by proximity to power. In that sense, distrust has become a mode of governance. A way to regulate through the careful distribution of credibility.

And beneath all of this lies a quieter pathology. A scepticism which is actually fatigue. When information multiplies faster than meaning, the easiest posture is disbelief. Suspicion becomes a form of safety and disengagement, a mode of survival. In this exhausted public sphere, cynicism passes for intelligence, and irony for dissent.

The Politics of Description

This loss of trust has a history. The authority to produce knowledge about India—what Edward Said called the *authority to describe*—was once a colonial prerogative. Said argued that empires didn’t just conquer territories. They conquered meaning. To represent another culture was to rule it symbolically. In his later essay *Permission to Narrate*, he showed how this power to tell the story, to be the narrator rather than be narrated, was the deepest form of political control.

Ashis Nandy called this the *colonisation of the imagination*. Not merely the dominance of Western power, but the internalisation of its gaze. Colonialism, for Nandy, did not end with the departure of the British. It persisted as a way of organising the self. The colonised learned to see themselves through the categories of the ruler such as rationality, masculinity, progress or civilisation, until even dissent took shape in the master’s language. To recover freedom, then, was not only to reclaim territory but to decolonise consciousness itself.

This is what makes India’s postcolonial predicament so enduring. Our political independence did not dissolve the epistemic hierarchy, it restructured it. The institutions that mediated knowledge such as universities, bureaucracies or the press remained bound to the same moral grammar of modernity, only now managed by us. As Nandy warned, we internalised the ruler’s categories even as we denounced his rule.

Dipesh Chakrabarty deepened this insight, showing how Europe continues to function as the unspoken subject of all history—the source of theory that others merely illustrate. In his book *Provincialising Europe*, he asks how we might inhabit inherited European categories critically rather than obediently. To use them while refusing their claim to universality. The task, he suggests, is not to replace Europe with a new centre, but to multiply centres. To think from India, Africa, or Latin America without having to pass through London or Paris for conceptual permission.

You don't need to read these thinkers to feel the truth of what they describe. It resurfaces every time a policymaker demands that research "become more practical", or when a talk on Indian society is dismissed as "Marxist jargon", or when a foreign scholar is expelled because their presence feels like surveillance. These gestures are not about facts or patriotism. They are about reasserting the right to name.

Who gets to define what counts as knowledge? That question is what truly divides the expert and the nationalist. Not their values, but their vocabularies.

The Liberal Blindspot

The liberal academic or journalist often responds to this crisis by defending the very institutions like the university, the press, or peer review, that others see as complicit. Defending expertise can sound like defending privilege. Reason itself starts to appear as metropolitan property.

When journalists invoke "facts" or scholars invoke "method", their audience hears only hierarchy. That is not a failure of communication. It is a failure of reciprocity. Those outside the circle of recognised expertise are not just uninformed, they are structurally disqualified from knowing. This, too, is a form of epistemic inequality.

The task, then, is not to abandon expertise but to reimagine its legitimacy. To recognise that resentment is not the opposite of reason, but its disowned twin, the shadow cast by centuries of exclusion. Only when we take that shadow seriously can public argument recover its dignity.

The Fragile Commons

We do not lack arguments. We lack a shared language of trust. What passes for polarisation is not the clash of opinions, but the exhaustion of a common grammar. The expert and the patriot no longer disagree within the same world. They disagree about what counts as the world.

Perhaps the task is not to bridge this divide, but to name it honestly. To see in our failures of conversation, a mirror of our history. Because every time we stop arguing, someone else decides who is allowed to speak.

To recover public debate, we may first need to recover the humility to listen. Not to agree, but to remain open to the fact that meaning itself is shared labour.

Endnotes

1. **Edward W. Said, Orientalism (1978)** and *The Permission to Narrate* (1984).

   Said's argument that empires rule not only through force but through *representation* underlies the phrase "authority to describe." The power to name, classify, and interpret others becomes a form of political control.

2. **Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism (1983).**

   Nandy's idea of the "colonisation of imagination" refers to how colonialism reshaped consciousness itself — making the colonised internalise the ruler's categories of reason, masculinity, and progress, even within their own dissent.

3. **Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (2000).**

   Chakrabarty calls attention to Europe's lingering role as the "theoretical subject" of all histories. His project urges thinking *with* European categories while refusing their universal authority — multiplying centres of knowledge rather than replacing one with another.

4. **Nadia Abu El-Haj, "An Economy of Suspicion," in Joseph Masco, Lisa Wedeen (Eds.) - Conspiracy/Theory (2024).**

   The term "economy of suspicion" is drawn from this essay, which examines how modern governance uses uncertainty and secrecy as instruments of control — a frame echoed in India's bureaucratic management of knowledge and media.

5. **Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments (1993).**

   Chatterjee's distinction between the "inner" (spiritual) and "outer" (material) domains of anticolonial nationalism helps illuminate the moral undercurrent in debates over who owns India's cultural knowledge today.