

What has been the impact of literacy on human society and thought?

“In the course of several years living among people of ‘other cultures’, I have never experienced the kinds of hiatus in communication that would be the case if I and they were approaching the physical world from opposite ends”¹. Jack Goody thus argues the case against a Levi-Straussian dichotomy between hot and cold societies. Nevertheless, bold claims have consistently been made about the impact a critical mass of mass literacy has upon a society and its institutions – as well as upon the structure of thought itself. Roy and Kapoor for example, write that literacy is “the best possible means for a developing nation to break the vicious circle of general backwardness and to make progress along the path of modernisation”²

Goody argues that literacy radically transforms society in a number of ways: by promoting the development of mathematics, the growth of individualism, the rise of bureaucracy, the spread of secularism and arguments over myth and history³. In particular, he emphasises the effect of writing in enabling one to separate the spoken from the speaker and thereby to assess the material of thought in a detached a-temporal manner⁴,

¹ Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.8

² P. Roy and J.M. Kapoor, *The retention of literacy* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1975), p.1; cited here from Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.156

³ Goody (1977), p.19.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.37

and with what he terms visuo-spatial communication⁵. The former facilitates a study of history – for while there can be a study of history without dates, “there is none without archives”⁶. The latter visuo-spatial aspect of writing on the page facilitates scanning⁷ and thereby the manner in which it is possible to compose, reflect upon, transmit and receive information⁸, but it also promotes a systemisation of knowledge by virtue of its medium⁹ and hence a formalised understanding of the passage of time. While Goody does allow that literacy can extend the orthodoxy of institutions by reifying a Great Book and thus enables literate religions to be spread as religions of conversion¹⁰ rather than just birth, with correspondingly wider ethical prescriptions; Goody insists that writing furthers the scope for critical activity and hence for scepticism¹¹, as well as functioning to standardise custom into “the law”¹². For Goody, literacy means the demise of a literati and hence the spread of knowledge outside the narrow guilds of initiates¹³; with the development of print ensuring a further standardisation and increase in the flow of information¹⁴.

Is the effect of literacy overstated? Jonathan Parry’s uses his ethnographic experience of the Brahmanical tradition in the city of Benares, India as a starting point for

⁵ ib., p.157

⁶ ib., p.148

⁷ ib., p.134

⁸ ib., pp.157-60

⁹ ib., p.149

¹⁰ Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.10

¹¹ Goody (1977), p.37

¹² Goody (1986), p.175

¹³ Goody (1977), p.138

¹⁴ ibid., p.148

a critique of the position laid out by Goody. He argues that far from being the crucial variable in determining whether societies are able to accumulate and reproduce scepticism¹⁵, literacy should be regarded as a concomitant condition brought about by wider causes that enable a transition to what he terms – using R. Horton’s phrase – “cognitive modernism”. Pointing to the tradition of Sanskrit learning in Benares, Parry notes that an adult literacy rate of 50%¹⁶ and the presence of written versions of Vedic and post-Vedic texts has conversely granted “ideological immunity to sceptical scrutiny”¹⁷ to the textual (*shastrik*) tradition, and popular recognition of the negotiable character of the oral (*laukik*) tradition.

The Brahman anthropologist M.N. Srinivas’ term “sanskritization”¹⁸ retains that connotation of civilization by reference group imitation, and Parry argues that the Sanskrit texts present a scribal tradition rather than a print tradition – whereby the textual imperative encourages interpretation and the recovery of an authentic behind the divergent “drift”¹⁹ of extant versions. Parry’s other findings suggest that the literate tradition does not in practice function as what Goody called “a restriction on spontaneity” – the *laukik* and the malleability of the texts to differing interpretations ensure that, for

¹⁵ Jonathan Parry, ‘The Brahmanical tradition and the technology of the intellect’, *Reason and Morality*, ed. Joanna Overing (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985), p.200

¹⁶ Parry (1985), p.203

¹⁷ *ibidem*, p.205

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ib.*, p.208

example, funerary priests are able to creatively elaborate on the mortuary rituals laid down in the *Preta Manjari*.

In the light of these inconsistencies, Parry turns to the claims which E.L. Eisenstein makes for print – claims equivalent to those of Goody for literacy. Print vastly alters the amount of text available for systematic cross-referencing, progressive analysis and individualised attribution. For Parry, what is important in Eisenstein’s analysis is that had priests and rulers rather than urban entrepreneurs monopolized control of the printing press, print would not have effected immediate social change²⁰. He writes, “the ‘printing revolution’ was revolutionary only because it was associated with a much wider ‘democratization of society and learning’ that was already underway”²¹. It is in the context of such wider social changes that the lay public’s submissions could be considered worthy of serious attention. Parry also attributes to the religious climate²² an active agency in promoting a transformation in mental life, positing doctrinal attitudes to empirical knowledge, manual labour, artisanship, vocation (and the work ethic) as relevant factors in determining whether “cognitive modernism” takes root in a given society.

The need for universal literacy brings the modern nation state into being. This is Ernest Gellner’s central claim as regards the impact of literacy. However, his argument

²⁰ ib., p.218

²¹ ib., p.219

²² ib.

again places the arrival of literacy within a wider social context – industrialisation – in which it becomes necessary for the state to have a “universal high culture”²³ of exo-socialised members who can interact outside the local intimate unit in an explicit, reasonably precise, low-context, standardised idiom²⁴. For Gellner it is the requirements of the literacy necessitated by industrialisation that causes the union of state and culture.

Systematically assessing each of the claims made for the influence of literacy upon human society and thought by those advocates of the stronger causal model²⁵ such as Goody, is Ruth Finnegan. Whist Finnegan agrees that writing has indeed had profound effects upon our consciousness over the course of centuries, she maintains that this is “not because writing in itself brings effects, but because of the way we have chosen to use and regard it, sanctioned by a whole series of educational, economic and political institutions”²⁶. Finnegan refers us to the Limba people of Sierra Leone to illustrate her contention that not only is the distinction between orality and literacy unhelpful, but that furthermore, literature, abstract reasoning and an awareness of the artifice of language are all enshrined within the Limba language²⁷. Where Talcott Parsons viewed the advent of writing as a “watershed”²⁸ moment, Finnegan avoids the radical divide model, concurring

²³ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1983), p.35

²⁴ Gellner (1983), p.38

²⁵ Finnegan (1988), p.159

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.180

²⁷ *ib.*, p.50

²⁸ *ib.*, p.148

instead with Stephen Feld – who concluded his decade of analysing the poetry and thought of the Papuan New Guinean Kaluli people with the following assessment:

Certain features of the Kaluli situation are unique, others can be generalized, but that ratio is complicated, and is not clarified by considering orality/literacy as the dependent variable in the evolution of consciousness.²⁹

Abner Cohen's description of an cattle trading market in Ibadan, Nigeria – a complex exchange market working on credit with no recourse to written contracts – is held up as an example of the differing degrees of reliance which bureaucracy and large-scale commerce can have upon literacy³⁰. The range of values which literacy can occupy should prevent one from claiming that it is a necessary prerequisite for the rise of empire, Finnegan argues; and neither is literacy historically a sufficient condition for the emergence of large-scale bureaucratic administration³¹. As for claims that literacy promotes rationality, objectivity and detachment, Finnegan argues that in cross-cultural research such as Patricia Greenfield's, there is ambiguity as to whether it is specific cognitive processes or varying socialisation procedures that are being exhibited; and further ambiguity as to whether or not this can be attributed to literacy³².

Whether literacy brings about a concomitant secularization and the systematised accumulation of information – what Goody called “a cumulative tradition of critical

²⁹ cited here from Finnegan (198), p.155

³⁰ *ib.*, p.148

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ib.*, p.151.

discussion” – depends, Finnegan notes, on the way in which institutions and books are used locally. Kathleen Gough noted that in traditional China, there was secular historical research, yet in India there was not: “*literacy* itself was not enough”³³, remarks Finnegan. In Europe the spread of printing also enabled the printing of a vast backlog of occult lore³⁴. Neither, argues Finnegan, should the link between the advent of mass literacy and greater individualism be made through claims about literacy promoting reading in private – the value of privacy and individuality is also found in non-literate contexts³⁵.

To conclude, with literacy rapid changes can occur in society. As Goody remarks, much of what is attributed to literacy should be considered a manifestation of the accumulation of information over time:

When people speak of the development of abstract thought out of the science of the concrete, the shift from signs to concepts, the abandonment of intuition, imagination, perception, these are little more than crude ways of assessing in general terms the kinds of processes involved in the cumulative growth of systematic knowledge.³⁶

Literacy enables this, as it does such phenomena as bureaucratisation, secularisation, the development of individualism, large-scale commerce and imperial expansion; yet it is one enabling factor of many and ought neither to be seen as the defining moment nor the effective cause of a transition between one kind of society and another. Gellner and Parry

³³ *ib.*, p.152

³⁴ *ib.*, p.153

³⁵ *ib.*, p.156

³⁶ Goody (1977), p.150

remind us that such changes – as well as the spread of mass literacy itself – need to be understood as part of a specific local historical milieu: which in Europe included industrialisation, the democratisation of education and an amenable religious climate.

Bibliography

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