

INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTRE NOTES

Study Weeks and Research Seminars

I

Interpretation of Literary Texts

A Research Seminar on the theme of "Interpretation of Literary Texts", sponsored by the Inter-University Centre and organized by the Department of English Gauhati University, was held from the 21st to the 26th of November, 1994. The Seminar was inaugurated by the Vice Chancellor of the University, Dr. N.K. Choudhury.

The first day of the Seminar was devoted to a discussion of new historicism and its impact on the practice of interpretation, following the key presentation by P.C. Kar on "New Historicism and the Interpretation of the Literary Text". He argued that new historicism emerged as an inevitable reaction against the failure of both the new critical and deconstructionist approaches. Building his argument around Greenblatt's seminal concept of "resonance" and the new historicists reformulation of the context-text relationship, he distinguished these from both the new critical belief that text and reader are stable, and the deconstructionist stand where text and context are "subsumed under the notion of textuality". Invoking Greenblatt's anecdote about Cardinal Wolsey's hat and its arrival at its present place of rest at Christ Church College, Oxford, as "represent(ing) the complex process of cultural appropriation and usage that a text undergoes", and a similar "cultural transformation and appropriation" in Borges' story of Pierre Menard and his right to authorship of *The Quixote*, through copying Cervantes' *Don Quixote* word by word in a different context, he stressed the need to "redefine the meaning of context as both determined by the contingencies of the text's originary moment of production and its displacement to new location charged with fresh resonance".

In their paper, "Historicism effaces History: Phenomenology of Literary Texts", Sukalpa Bhattarjee and Prasenjit Biswas applied historicist ideas derived from Benjamin, Jameson, Derrida and Greenblatt, to the reading of third world texts like Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*. The paper by Sumanyu Sathpathy examined the assumptions behind new historicism regarding the interpretation of a literary text as a historical document.

In his paper, "Text, Meaning and Interpretation: An overview of Critical Thought", K.N. Phukan maintained that novelties entering critical thought through increasing interdisciplinary activity, are better encountered when grounded in, for example, the relatively more familiar ideas of Eliot or those of Sontag.

Pori Hiloidari presented a deconstructionist reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*; Rajat Bhattacharya pleaded for the necessity of stable meaning and Bharat Bhusan Mohanty, talked about the "freeing" of the text, by Barthe. Moving on to a different area Malinee Goswami discussed the methods adopted by commentators in the restoration, reconstruction and preservation of ancient Sanskrit and Prakrit texts.

Dilip Barua assessed the status of interpretation after the proliferation of various linguistic philosophies starting with Saussure's distinction of langue and parole and of the components of the sign into the signifier and the signified.

K.C. Baral, talked about the feminist's encounter with post-structuralist questioning of the unified subject, the centre and the self, and the subsequent grouping of feminists into those who use such theories to erase the author and subvert patriarchal authority, and those who argue that such concession will erase the woman's identity as author or reader. He discussed the creation and reception of Katherine Mansfield text from a feminist theoretical perspective. Liza Das tackled the question of whether a male can be a feminist critic. She interrogated a variety of feminist critical texts to claim that feminists, out of necessity have acquired a distinctive critical method which perhaps cannot be adopted by men.

M.L. Raina's "Who killed the Text?" pleaded for return to a position where the text has a meaningful existence, exclusive of the linguistic pyrotechnics that might be unleashed upon it.

In her paper, "Resentment as a Critical Position: The Post Colonial Critic", Nandana Dutta, sought to question through the familiar Western text of Huckleberry Finn, whether a more rigorous critical position can be achieved beyond resentment. Krishna Barua used Virginia Woolf's *a Room of One's Own* and Patrick White's *The Tynborn Affair*, to illustrate the continued possibility of an androgynous interpretation of literary texts.

Birendranath Datta opened up an entirely new dimension to the seminar by pointing to the oral tradition that is intrinsic to both literature and folklore. He talked about differences that would emerge between oral and written traditions within folklore studies. He provided excellent examples of an oral tradition passing into a written one in the *Katha Guru Charita* a prose biography of the great neo-Vaishnava saints Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva (15th to 16th centuries). Dutta also discussed the issue of performance and its relation to texts, using examples from Assam's artistic heritage, in particular the rendering of "bargits" in performance and as literary texts.

In his paper on translation, "Transference of the Cultural Moment or Is Literature a view from Nowhere?" Pradip Acharya maintained that there was no transcendent luminous moment: only the 'empty space' between the lines became the utopian space for primary deliberation before the text of the source language is transferred to the text of the target language. Ranjita Chaudhury, suggested that the reading of a text is a dynamic process of recreation and Asha

Kuthari explored the relationship between the written dramatic text and the text in performance, particularly for students in an Indian classroom, where a theatrical performance is a remote possibility. She concluded that such a problematic reading context gives a "whole new dimension to interpretation".

On the last day of the seminar, Hirendranath Gohain took the debate back to questions raised earlier in the Seminar, on the violation of a text's integrity by an overzealous adherence to post-structuralist methods of interpretation. While acknowledging the necessity of coming to terms with ideas which have progressively gained favour among academics, he suggested that the critic should be capable of historicizing his approach and use his newly acquired critical tools with discrimination.

II

Technology, Change and Development

A Research Seminar on "Technology, Change and Development" was held at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, from 22 to 28 February 1995 under the convenership of Rajan Gurukkal. The Seminar was formally inaugurated by Professor A. Sukumaran Nair, Vice-Chancellor of the University.

In the opening presentaion, P.R.K. Rao of IIT. Kanpur, dealt with the inadequacies of current theorising about social change. This formed the backdrop for the discussion, which followed, of various issues concerning the problems of social change. The discussion focussed particularly on the material practices and cognitive orientations of agents involved in the process of social change.

In his approach paper on "Productivity and Growth in the Context of Technological Change, K.K. Subramanian of the Centre for Development Studies, Ullor, Trivandrum, highlighted different aspects of transfer of technology in the context of the paradigm of "development" and explored the possibility of repeating the miracle of "development" in countries like India following the model of South-East Asian economies. The discussion that followed considered the radical limits of the development paradigm, and, in fact, this became a recurrent theme in all the other sessions as well. An interesting presentation was that of William R. Da Silva of the Department of Sociology, University of Goa. Da Silva spoke on the "Technological Hegemony and the Loss of Master Discourse". He explored the ideological background of the genesis of technological hegemony in different discursive forms.

Thomas Issac's paper "From Handicraft to Machine Power: Dynamics of Technology Change in a Labour Surplus Economy" was an attempt at an analysis of changes taking place in the coir industry in Kerala in the wake of technological transformations. The analysis was in the classical Marxist mode looking at issues

of labour displacement and problems attendant on technological changes.

P.J. Philip spoke about the integration of small peasantry into the global economy and tried to identify the relationship between the changing pattern within agrarian economy with the larger realities of a global arrangement. John Kurien dealt with the changing patterns of technology in the fisheries sector and showed the depth and adequacy of the traditional knowledge of fisherfolk about various technical aspects of fishing. These traditional forms of knowledge have now been almost obliterated and replaced by new technologies and new systems of knowledge. In her lead paper, "Technology and Society: the Proto-Historic Period", Shereen Ratnagar spoke about the various technological practices of the indigenous people of proto-historic India. She highlighted the material practices of various communities which helped them survive and flourish as communities. The discussion of her paper centered naturally enough, round, the question of the divide between traditional knowledge systems and modern science. Issues like the alleged autonomy and non-materiality of technology, and the philosophical basis for claims of this kind also came up for consideration.

Prema Rajagopalan talked about the technological practices of goldsmiths in Madras city, particularly about the social aspects of the transmission of technological knowledge from one generation to another and cultural issues that determine specialisations in a particular craft. There were also interesting presentations dealing with questions of technology transfer in the perspective of critical political economy, stressing on the imperialist overtones of modern technology.

There were two special lectures as part of the Seminar: one by Shereen Ratnagar on "Technology and the Past" and the other by P.R.K. Rao on "Technology and the Future".

In his paper on "Computational Technology and Rural Networks Today", B. Yajna Narayana of IIT, Madras, dealt with frontier areas of research in this field: and Professor Iqbal, Professor of Neurosurgery, Government Medical College, Kottayam, talked about medical technology and modern society detailing the evolving technological hegemony in this sphere.

The last session of the Seminar was a Symposium on philosophical issues relating to technology and change. Professor P.R.K. Rao and Shereen Ratnagar led the deliberations in the Symposium which brought together the various ideas and trends of thought that emerged in the course of the entire Seminar.

III

Objectivity in the Social Sciences

An IUC research seminar cum workshop on Objectivity in the Social Sciences meant for young scholars and teachers in humanities and social sciences was held

in the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur from March 23 to 30, 1995. The seminar had two parts. The first one (March 23-28) was concerned with the main theme of the research seminar, namely, objectivity in the social sciences and other related issues. The second one (March 29-30) was devoted to a symposium on Understanding Tradition.

The four resource persons to the research seminar were: M. Mullick (Philosophy, I.I.T. Kanpur), Gurpreet Mahajan (Political Science, JNU), Rajan Gurukkal (History, Mahatam Gandhi University, Kottayam) and TVS Ram Mohan Rao (Economics, IIT Kanpur). There were twenty three formally registered participants from all over the country, out of whom nineteen were able actually to take part in the seminar. Besides, there were several other local participants who were not formally registered. Registered participants were drawn from various disciplines such as Economics, History, Linguistics, Philosophy, Political Science and Sociology. The participants were a mix of university/college lectures and research scholars.

The following were the topics of the lectures given by the resource persons (1) Why Objectivity: Concept and Content (M. Mullick); (2) Truth, Objectivity and Relativism (M. Mullick); (3) Ethno-Social Science (Gurpreet Mahajan); (4) Post-modernism and Social Science (Gurpreet Mahajan); (5) Hermeneutics, Objectivity and the Historian's Practice (Rajan Gurukkal); (6) "Objectivity and Explanatory Human Geography" (Rajan Gurukkal); (7) "Limitations of the Objectivity Paradigm" (TVS Rammohan Rao).

Some of the notable presentations by the participants were: "Representing Social Process and Tribal identity: the Process of Knowledge in a Traditional Religious Setting", "Policy Research and the Question of Objectivity", "Rationalization of Politics and the Concern of Pluralism", "Reflections on Critical Theory", "Phenomenological Approach to Objectivity", "Sources of Bias in Scientific Investigations: a View from Economics", and "Objectivity in Linguistics".

The symposium on Understanding Tradition, which was the second part of the seminar, had six three-hour long sessions. The symposiasts were Professors A.K. Saran, G.C. Pandey, K.N. Sharma, M. Mullick and Rajan Gurukkal. The central issue debated in the symposium was whether tradition is to be understood in terms of the actual manifest material process of human history or in terms of a certain transcendental core. While the latter view emphasized the eternal, ineffable and mysterious, essence of tradition and hence insistently denied any possibility either of pairing or of contrasting tradition with modernity, the former considered the transcendentalization of tradition to be something programmatically inimical to the social scientist's concern of 'scientifically' investigating socio-human reality. The practising social scientist's problem was: If the core of traditions is inaccessible, and yet alluding to that core is required in any deep understanding of socio-human reality, then how can the project of understanding any bit of socio-human reality ever get off the ground?

IV

Ethnic Movements in Contemporary India

An IUC Study Week on the theme of "Ethnic Movements in Contemporary India" was held at the Institute from June 26-July 1, 1995. S.L. Sharma, of Panjab University was the Convener. The Study week discussed both theoretical issues pertaining to ethnicity and related concepts and actual movements which have taken place in various parts of the country.

In his lead paper "Comprehending Ethnic Movements in India", Partha N. Mukherji, advocated the view that ethnicity signifies protonational bonds and observed that the concept of ethnicity cannot be understood without a reference to the concept of nation. In regard to the interface between ethnicity and nation he identified two conceptual orientations, one standing for the ethno-national project and the other for the state-sponsored project of nation building. The ethno national project implies a linear trajectory which moves from ethnic group to ethnicity to nation and finally to nation state. The state sponsored project on the other hand is a case of civil nationalism which seeks to incorporate ethnicity in its orbit. For a multiethnic society like India he found the ethno national project problematic on account of the fact that ethnicity involves internal cultural and structural differentiations within it. In order to identify a movement as ethnic, he distinguished five domains, i.e., ethnicity, class, power, gender and eco-environment, each of which is marked by an internal structure of asymmetrical relationships. These structures of asymmetries contain within them contradictions which may be primary or secondary. It is the focus of the primary contradiction in a particular domain that defines the character and basis of the movement.

On the concept of ethnicity, there emerged a measure of agreement on two conceptions of ethnicity, labelled as genric and emergent by S.L. Sharma but cultural and power conceptions by R.K. Jain, the emergent or power conception being particularly significant in the contemporary context. On the question of differentiating ethnic from non-ethnic, R.K. Jain proposed the principle of social heredity as a defining feature of ethnicity which was contested by Kumar Suresh Singh. It was widely agreed that ethnicity signifies invocation of a sense of cultural distinction for purposes of political ends. There also emerged a great deal of consensus on the thesis that ethnicity is a contextual category, an identity construct and a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Some of the important dimensions identified were linguistic, regional, religious, historical and tribal. Any one or combination of these dimensions could be invoked in a given situation for purposes of political mobilisation .

Ajit Bhattacharjea presented a political analysis of Kashmir's claim to self-determination and maintained that the Indian state has dithered in keeping its

promises. Bashir Ahmad Dabla presented the perceptions of Kashmiri Muslims, which he found to be in agreement with Bhattacharjea's position. Disagreeing with both, Professor T.N. Madan presented the perception of Kashmiri Pandits. Arguing that Kashmir does not have a single past but at least three pasts—a Hindu, a Muslim and a composite one—the last one representing the true meaning of Kashmiriyat. The Kashmir movement, in his opinion, is built on a wrong premise, i.e., the Islamic past and not on *Kashmiriyat*, the composite character of Kashmiri culture. Riyaz Punjabi drew attention to the emergence of a middle class among Kashmiri Muslims which, in his opinion, was playing a critical role in the Kashmir movement. He viewed the present movement as a direct assault on the ethnicity of Kashmir as it represents an attempt to superimpose an alien identity on Kashmir.

On the Punjab movement, Bisham Sahni maintained that it was not an ethnic movement, as religion alone cannot serve as the sole criterion for defining ethnicity. He found it heartening that there did not exist any communal divide in Punjab, in spite of the promptings from various groups. In his paper, J.S. Grewal situated Punjab movement in its historical context. He maintained that Sikh identity was constructed long before the Khalistan movement appeared. In fact, it preceded the construct of Hindu identity as well. Khalistan movement was the invocation of Sikh identity for political purposes. A.S. Narang provided an account of the rise of ethnic consciousness in Punjab in the context of development and democracy. He argued that it is a distorted form of capitalist development in Punjab crippled with the politicization stimulated by the struggle for power between the Congress and Akali parties that gave rise to the Punjab movement.

A.C. Sinha, Sujata Miri and Kailash Aggarwal spoke about the various ethnic movements in the North-East. There was an interesting debate about whether some, at least, of these movements had, in any deep way, much to do with a "search" for ethnic identity. Sinha pointed to the trend of many of these movements joining forces; Sujata Miri underlined the role of christianisation in understanding ethnic assertions in the region; and Kailash Aggarwal discussed how language became the focal point of the powerful Meititilon movement.

K. Gopal Iyer made an interesting comparison between the Jharkhand movement and the Dravidian movement; R.K. Jain dealt with the question of ethnicisation of caste in Uttar Pradesh in light of "Mandalisation" and the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party; Amita Malik talked about the ethnic stereotypes propagated by the cinema and the electronic media. In an absorbing presentation, K. Suresh Singh shared his life long experience of thinking about and practical involvement in problems arising out of ethnic assertions in our country. He stressed the fact that we have moved from bio-social ethnicity to psycho-social ethnicity—from looking ethnic to feeling ethnic.

Making Meaning in Indian Cinema

A Study Week on "Making Meaning in Indian Cinema" was held in Shimla on 26 to 29 October, 1995, under the convenership of Ravi Vasudevan. In the framework drawn up for participants of the Study Week there was to be a focus on the ways cinema could be understood historically. Relatedly, it was hoped that by analysing the modes of address and narration employed in cinema insight would be provided in the audio-visual experiences involved in the formation of modern Indian society. While questions of cinematic address, form and narrative method were of central concern in this framework, analysis of reception was also invited: the particular way various publics, audiences and state institutions responded to the cinema in popular and film society periodicals, government reports and enquiry proceedings, public lobbies and petitions. Reflections on the historical distinctions that had emerged within the cinema, between popular, art and avant-garde practices as well as through different language versions of films, were also highlighted for analysis. It was hoped that the study-week would be able to discuss the political functions of cinema against these backdrops, an evolving account of the complex formal, institutional and social location of film in India.

It is perhaps an index of the general direction of film studies in India today that, of the 12 papers presented, only two were concerned with what might be called the field of art and avant-garde practice, Madan Gopal Singh's 'The Homeless Image' and Sanjoy Mukhopadhyaya's 'Reframing Meghe Dhaka Tara'. Using Sant Tukaram (Fatehlal and Damle, 1936) and the work of Kumar Shahani and Mani Kaul, Madan wrote about the way the cinema, or an ideal version of it, had taken over and transposed the metaphor of homelessness associated with the history of sufism and the bhakti poets into an exploration of contemporary experience. Mukhopadhyaya's was a contribution to reception studies, highlighting how writers outside film criticism, specifically the modernist poet Bishnu De and the Social scientist Boudhayan Chattopadhyaya, were able to escape the straitjacket of realist expectations in their response to Ghatak's film.

Ravi Vasudevan, Venkatesh Chakravarty and M.S.S. Pandian all concentrated on public discourses generated about the cinema, and by it. Vasudevan highlighted the problems of categorizing and various types of antagonistic response to the cinema available in government archives alongside those expressing cinephilia, a love for cinema. Using Phalke, he suggested that the cinema itself generated an image of the public through its particular modes of address and representation, and that this has implications for the historical negotiation of modernity by Indian society. Pandian looked into the categories, especially of realism and classicism, used by Tamil elites in their critique of popular film. Chakravarty attacked the hierarchical discourses deriving from art

and avant-garde film practice, arguing that the history of Tamil cinema revealed the potential for generating an alternate film culture within the popular. He screened Enn Uir Thozhan (Bhartiraja, 1989) to back his case. Ashish Rajadhyaksha's paper 'An agenda for film studies in India' overlapped with these concerns, in that he highlighted the problem of spectatorship and cinema publics, and the discourses generated by the industry in representing its narrative activity, specifically around the importance of the Hollywood model in identifying/ distinguishing the nature of Indian film.

Hollywood was also the sub-text of Moinak Biswas's presentation on Harano Sur (Ajay Kar, 1956) a key film in the cycle of successes pairing Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. Biswas demonstrated the applicability of melodrama criticism evolved for Hollywood cinema in relation to this popular Bengali work, especially around how questions of 'excess' in *mise-en-scene* (literally, how figures, objects, colours are 'placed-in-scene') is used to articulate fraught or forbidden feelings. As this appears to derive from a fairly short period in the history of Bengali film, there are fascinating possibilities here for how a particular theme, the formation of the compassionate couple, was channeled through a certain narrative form of desire at a time of dramatic political and ideological change. Another highly intricate paper, on the restructuring of narrative form, was Madhava Prasad's on Roja (Maniratnam, 1992) and Damini (Raj Kumar Santoshi, 1993). Using notions of 'formal' and 'real' subsumption emerging from Marx's understanding of the shifting terms of labour's subordination to capital, and carried on in enquiries into ideology by Etienne Balibar, Prasad suggested that recent socio-economic transformation provided the context for a change in the way film narratives organised story information, and invited an alternation in the relations amongst spectator, character and state.

Rajadhyaksha's paper also usefully highlighted an emerging debate about disciplinary boundaries in the study of film, especially the way in which cultural studies had complicated the notion of too rigidly formalist an approach to film. Something of the more flexible terms of a cultural studies approach was perhaps represented in the papers by Tejaswini Niranjana on *Kadhalan* (Shankar, 1995), Ranjani Majumdar on the changing significance of the male body in contemporary Bombay cinema, Ajanta Sircar on 'Genre system' of 1980s Bombay cinema' and T. Muraleedharan on the way in which the notion of diaspora had complicated the question of reading. Niranjana examined the performance-driven Tamil/Telugu success in terms of discourses of consumerism and the subaltern body along with more formalist reflections on the spatial rather than temporal terms of narrative construction. Majumdar argued for a close relationship between evolving images of the male body and discourses of family, community and nationhood. Sircar suggested that the terms of film narrative in the 1980s would have to be reconsidered in relation to the diversification of industrial interests into the music, video and tv business. And Muraleedharan argued that a hermeneutics of film needed to be substantially reframed via an understanding of the way in which audiences differentiated by

social, 'regional' and gendered indices would respond to a film.

In conclusion, the participants, who had come from considerable distance (Madras, Trichur, Hyderabad, Calcutta and Bombay) expressed great pleasure in opportunity given for interaction. Something of the sense of an emerging community of scholarship, hitherto dispersed and difficult to communicate with, was put together over these four days, thanks the Inter-University Centre hosting what in many ways seemed an important moment in the development of film studies.