

Literacy and Communication in Indian Tradition

A Study Week was held on "Literacy and Communication in Indian Tradition" at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi from March 9 to 11, 1994, under the auspices of the UGC, Inter-University Centre in Humanities and Social Sciences, and IIAS, Shimla. The Participants included:

Doctors I. Mahadevan, R. Champakalakshmi, Rajan Gurukkal, Sukumari Bhattacharji, Kumkum Roy, Viswa Mohan Jha, R. Narasimhan, Kumkum Sangari, Poromesh Acharya, Arun Nag, A.R. Venkatachalam, Zafarul Islam, Susmita Dasgupta, Kunal Chakrabarti, Gautam Bhadra, Sanjay Subrahmanyam.

During the last three decades a number of scholars like Havelock, Goody, Ong, and Olson have persuasively argued that Western culture changed fundamentally subsequent to the invention of alphabetic script by the Greeks. They suggest that alphabetic literacy was an essential enabling factor in the development of Greek democratic, analytic and sceptical traditions. The cognitive claims of the literacy thesis have no substance.

However, most of these studies are almost exclusively based on Western tradition—on Greece, Christianity and Reformation. Kathleen Gough's preliminary analysis of Indian and Chinese experiences shows that the consequences of literacy have been rather variable when compared to the west European experience. It is generally believed that the early sacred and ritual literatures of India were all products of an oral milieu and that, despite literary underpinnings, Indian tradition has continued to remain an oral one in its intellectual and psychological aspects.

The speakers seemed to agree that although writing was known to India from a very early period (even the Vedas were committed to

writing as early as the 8th century B.C., one paper argued, the mode of communication remained predominantly oral. The advantage of oral transmission was that the totality of symbol referent relationships was immediately experienced by the individual and thus more deeply learned. When the product of writing was thus transmitted, the literate groups retained absolute control over the material, and through continuous oral transmission of written texts they eventually came to acquire a referential base for the whole society. Writing in itself was not the decisive factor, but to whom the written texts were read out, by whom, and how, were of crucial social significance. This arrangement was naturally conducive to the propagation of the ideology of the culturally dominant groups and the State often enlisted the services of the literate specialists to legitimise its power.

Although the pervasive potentiality of writing was recognised, some papers refused to accept the supposed correlation between literacy and the development of knowledge as a valid reasoning in the Indian context. It was suggested that subjects so complex and precise as *nyaya* could be effectively transmitted by oral means alone. On the other hand doubts were raised with regard to the social construction of illiteracy in Indian tradition and its possible connotation in popular consciousness.

However, it was argued that the authority and sanctity attached to the written word was symptomatic of a transition from one social formation to another. It was suggested that the use of writing implied that a transition was taking place from pastoralism to plough agriculture which paved the way for the emergence of a class with superior rights over land and the formation of state power.

Problems of Cultural and Political Autonomy in Indian Society

The Study Week organised by Inter-University Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences was held from 22-27 March 1993 at IIAS, Shimla.

With the unprecedented growth and expansion of the means of communication, transportation and various other technologies, the different cultures and societies in the world are no longer in a state of relative isolation and independence from one another. In the context of the economic, political, social and cultural interactions at an uneven level, the issues of political sovereignty, cultural identity and cultural autonomy have gained considerable significance.

The question of autonomy needs to be examined both from the perspectives of collectivity as well as the individual because any quest for autonomy involves a continuous and constant struggle at different levels. Autonomy needs to be seen not merely as independence from the interference and control by others but primarily in terms of the capacity of a society and its members to regulate their own affairs. In this context it needs to be examined as to what extent the capacities and opportunities for self-regulation can be regarded as a foundational feature of autonomy.

The following issues were discussed:

1. What are the criteria of differentiation between one's 'own' culture and 'other' cultures? In view of the considerable exchange (voluntary as well as forced, deliberately planned as well as arising out of exigencies of unforeseen circumstances), and intermingling of diverse elements from different cultural communities, is it possible to visualise, in contemporary times, how any culture would have developed in total isolation from other cultures? Is it possible to search for a pure, unpolluted indigenous cul-

tural identity?

2. What is the relationship between culture, politics and economy? What are the conditions for cultural and political autonomy? Which factors are likely to enhance or obstruct autonomy in the interaction between different cultures? What is the relationship between the autonomy of a community and the autonomy of its individual members?
 3. Is competence a pre-requisite for autonomy at the collective and the individual level? If it is so, what is the role of various skills and technologies in generating the relations of dependence, subordination and domination among communities and individuals? Is it possible to differentiate between technologies which contribute towards competence and the others which result in dependence and disaster?
 4. Is there any relationship between the ideals of social equality, individual freedom and social justice and the ideals of cultural and political autonomy? Do we need a critical restructuring of some of the traditional Indian practices and institutions for realising the ideals of cultural and political autonomy?
 5. What policies and steps need to be adopted to articulate and practise a distinctive harmonious cultural and political identity in order to overcome the erosion and mutilation of the basic norms of the composite Indian culture reflected in the conflicting aspirations articulated by the sectarian leadership of the diverse religious faiths, linguistic groups and other sections?
- Participants included:
- Dr. Satya P. Gautam (Convenor), Prof. M.P. Rege, Prof. Ramashray Roy, Prof. M. Pandey, Shri Girdhar Rathi, Shri Rameshwara Mishra Pankaj, Dr. Rajiv Lochan, Shri Yogendra Yadav, Prof. Ramesh Chandra Shah, Dr. Prem Singh, Prof. Javeed Alam, Prof. Jaidev, Dr. A.S. Narang.

The major rubrics around which discussion was held in Study Week on 'Federalism in India', from 1 to 5 November, 1993, at IIAS, Shimla:

- i) Recasting Centre-State relations: Constitutional, political, financial and administrative aspects – an exercise in building a balanced and cooperative federal system in India.
- ii) Working of India's political system and party system at the three levels – Centre / all India, State / region, and local bodies /

Federalism in India

- Panchayats and Nagarpalikas: Areas of convergence and areas of discord.
- iii) Socio-cultural pluralism in India – ethnic segments, regional and sub-regional identities, religious communities, language groups etc.
- iv) Problems of tension and coordination of pluralism, in the process of federal nation-building.
- v) Regionalism, Regional Movements and demand for smaller states in India.
- vi) Patterns and folk-traditions of composite culture in different states and regions of India.
- vii) Dimensions of Caste, Class and Politics in Federal India.

Participants included:

Prof. Rasheeduddin Khan (Convenor), Dr. P.R. Dubashi, Prof. T.K. Oommen, Prof. Amal Ray, Mr. A.G.

Noorani, Mr. Sayeed Naqvi, Prof. S.K. Chaube, Dr. Nalini Pant, Dr. A.S. Narang, Prof. Vakil, Dr. Pradeep Kumar, Dr. Bidhyut Chakrabarti, Dr. Sandeep Shastri, Dr. Ajay Kumar Singh, Dr. Kumar Suresh Singh, Dr. Arshi Khan, Prof. Raghvendra Rao, Prof. Randhir Singh.

Sayeed Naqvi's video cassette on "Composite Culture of India" was shown to the Fellows, IUC Associates, and the participants.

STUDY WEEK

Collapse of the Existing Socialist State System

A Study Week, entitled 'Collapse of the Existing Socialist State System' was held from 7-12 June 1993, under the auspices of Inter-University Centre for Humanities & Social Sciences, at IIAS, Shimla. The convenor of the Study Week was Prof. Javeed Alam.

The purpose was to examine the causes and implications of the disintegration and collapse of the 'Socialist Camp'; an event which was not only unexpected but altered the very nature of relations among the states in the world.

The themes around which the Study Week was organised, were:

1. Socialist Construction in the Imperialist Era.
2. Issues Centred around State, Bureaucracy and Democracy in the Socialist State.
3. Centralised Planning and Innovative Efficiency in the Socialist System.
4. Handling of Nations and Nationalities in Theory and Practice.
5. Socialist State in Relation to Cultural Practice.

On each of the five core papers there were three contributory notes which dealt with one specific area of concern. In

addition there was a paper on the nature of the developments in Marxist theory after 1917 revolution which did not allow for an internal critique of practice to take shape in the socialist states. One day was devoted to the discussions on each of these core themes. As such there were six core themes.

The contributors tried to go into these problems with a threefold focus. These were as follows:

- i. The internal causes for an external influences on the collapse of the Socialist States.
- ii. The implication and consequences of the collapse for (a) the world, (b) the Third World countries and (c) India.
- iii. The lessons suggested for the global transformative process as well as the possibilities for the renewal of the socialist emancipatory project.

The core papers were contributed by Prabhat Patnaik, Achin Vinayak, Tahir Mahmood, Ajit Ray, Kumaresh Chakravorty and Rajiv Bhargava.

At the end it was decided that the contributors would send revised versions of their papers for a book on this subject.

IIAS INFORMAL EXCHANGES

Besides formal Seminars/lectures, the Institute organizes informal discussions with eminent scholars and Fellows of the Institute.

Under one such programme, Dr. Georgiy J. Kho-dorovskiy, Ambassador, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine, had discussions with the Fellows on April 30, 1993.

Professor Romila Thapar, Amita Malik and former Air Commodore Shri Jasjit Singh spent an evening with the Fellows and Associates on May 11, June 18 and June 21, 1993 respectively.

Dr. P.K. Ayenger, Member of the Atomic Energy Commission, had informal discussions with the Institute Fellows on May 19, 1993.

Bernard Crick, Professor Emeritus of London University, spoke on George Orwell in an after-dinner session with the Fellows on September 6, 1993.

On 24 September 1993, the Fellows and Associates of the Institute had an evening of rec-

ollections with the former Director of the Institute, Prof. J.S. Grewal.

On October 22, 1993 Professor Randhir Singh, National Fellow of the Institute, spoke on his career as a Marxist activist and teacher, and read out some of his Punjabi poems and Dr. Chaman Lal read out the English translations.

Shri Bhisham Sahni, the famous Hindi novelist, short story writer and dramatist, spent an evening with the Fellows on October 29, 1993.

The Institute has also been holding bag-lunch-sessions with visiting scholars and eminent professionals from all walks of life. In May, 1993, there was a three cornered bag-lunch debate between three ex-members of the Planning Commission - J.D. Sethi, G.S. Bhalla and Arun Ghosh followed by questions from the Fellows.

Ms Minnie Vaid, correspondent of News track, also, had informal discussions during bag-lunch-session on November 21, 1993.

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