

Indian Council for  
Historical Research

**SEMINARS,  
WORKSHOPS  
AND  
CONFERENCES**

As outlined in the objectives of the Council to organise, sponsor and support seminars, workshops and conferences for the promotion and utilization of historical research, the ICHR extended financial assistance to 53 organisations of historians for holding their conferences and seminars both at regional and national levels. It also extended publication subsidy to 26 Journals/Proceedings. To mark the 450th anniversary of Akbar's birth one-week workshop on "Akbar and His Age" was organised in Varanasi. It was organised during 5-11 October 1993 in collaboration with National Research Institute of Human Culture and attended by 55 scholars drawn from different colleges/universities of UP. Prominent scholars who delivered lectures on different aspects of Akbar's personality and views and also the policy, economy and culture of his time were Professors Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib, Hari Shankar Srivastava, Surendra Gopal, M.Z.U. Siddiqui and Professor Anand Krishna.

During the period under report one workshop for 12 days was organised by the Department of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam from 18 January to 29 January 1994. Professor Rajan Gurukkal was the director of the workshop. Forty participants drawn from different parts of Kerala attended the workshop. Thirty lectures were delivered by noted historians. These included Professors Romila Thapar, M.G.S. Narayanan, M.R. Raghavan Varier, M.P. Sreekumaran Nair, M. Muralidharan, Surendra Rao and Professor Kesavan Veluthat. Copies of the Council's reading material in two volumes on "Historical Method" and "Trends in Indian History" were also distributed among the participants.

**SEMINAR ON  
MODERN INDIA: TERMS OF DISCOURSE**

The seminar was held at the IIAS from 22 to 27 May 1994. In his preliminary note, Professor Mrinal Miri, Director of the IIAS, suggested that the old-fashioned expression "foundations of thought" was a more appropriate title for the seminar than "terms of discourse". The papers submitted could be seen in terms of two broad categories: those dealing with conventional discursive domains and those dealing with the conventionally non-discursive domains of the aesthetic and creative.

On the general question of the phenomenon of modernity, there were two contributions. Professor A.K. Saran saw modernity as grounded in aestheticism. He employed the Kirkegaardian hierarchy of three levels of ascension — the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, and argued that modernity remained at the lowest level of the axiological hierarchy. Hence modern man was unable to come to terms with both history and nature. His rejection of God and the transcendental categories, combined with his over-commitment to a narcissistic humanism, prevented him from constituting a proper human order. He suggested that Habermas's efforts to transform and redeem instrumental rationality into communicative rationality by using a Weberian framework did not succeed. Professor R.K. Jain held that the tradition-modernity duo were rooted in a linear conception of history. He attacked the essentialism and reification involved in this formulation. S.N. Nagarajan raised questions about the notion of freedom in relation to efficiency within modernity.

Professor Sundar Rajan offered a critique of the dominant modernist understanding of science formulated in terms of power, knowledge and rationality. He drew attention to the disastrous consequences that followed when this paradigm was inserted into discourses on modern social and cultural sciences. He suggests that the difficulty could be overcome by invoking a new model of science made possible by the recent "linguistic turn" in epistemology. He also made the innovative proposal that the notion of *rasa* could be profitably used in developing this new scientific paradigm. Professor Vinod Sena focused on the work of Sant Kripal Singh to argue that a balanced equation between science and religion was

possible through recourse to a discourse on mysticism. In a critique of the dominant modes of discourse on modern India, Professor Dharmendra Goel pleaded for a more suitable framework for understanding and living in modern India.

Professor J.D. Sethi believed that modern India can be saved only by a serious and creative engagement in the Gandhian alternative on religion and secularism. Assuming feminism to be a characteristically modern phenomenon, Dr Som P. Ranchan advocated that the Indian Tantric tradition should be explored as a resource for generating an indigenous notion of feminism.

Professor J.S. Grewal surveyed the colonial discourse on medieval India in detail to show the link between colonialism and modernity. He argued that this understanding would help us in constituting a legitimate idea of Indian modernity. Professor Javeed Alam discussed the issue of authenticity in constructing the notion of India, and focused on the problematic of "the other". He pleaded for an adequate conceptual language to handle the issues raised by "the other". In doing this one must avoid a populist dismissal of colonial or imperial vocabulary and must work out a proper translation of the experience of the people into a conceptual vocabulary. Professor S.P. Banerjee explored the nature and the problems of modern Indian society by employing the notion of the "one-dimensional" first used by Herbert Marcuse, the *guru* of the neo-Marxist student revolutionaries of the late 1960s in the West.

Professor Thomas Pantham focused on the problematic of the subaltern within the Indian discourse on modernity. In a critical examination of the literature recently emerging on this issue, he suggested that two readings of the problematic had emerged — the theoretical and the strategic-political. In his conclusion he suggested that the "essentialist privileging of violent struggles over all other forms of resistance" implicit in the strategic-political approach stemmed from "the dichotomously essentialized notions of self and other." Dr Ramashray Roy dealt with the theme of village self-sufficiency, taking off from the Gandhian starting point. In an interesting paper, Dr Raju attempted an historical investigation

into the constitution of the categories of wealth and production in the colonial context in India. He pleaded for a transcendence of the production domain into the "symbolic world".

In the papers exploring Indian modernity through the literary domain, Dr Jasodhara Bagchi discussed Bankimchandra as a writer centrally involved in facing the anxiety of modernity. Professor Suresh Sharma's paper traced the thought of Savarkar and examined the complexity of its sources.

Shri Nirmal Verma presented an illuminating paper on the question of what constitutes a tradition. He explored the current misunderstandings in our definition of tradition. Professor Jaidev, in his analysis and interpretation of R.K. Narayan's novel *The Vendor of Sweets*, demonstrated that the struggle between Indian traditional life and modernity is not over, but, in fact, it is constitutive of Indian modernity itself.

Dr Shivaji K.P. Panikkar examined the relationship between art, subjectivity and ideology in colonial and post-Independence India. Confining himself to his special field of painting, he showed how what he calls "radicalized subjectivity" alone can generate a radical social environment which would provide an appropriate historical context for political praxis. In his paper Dr Nandakumar took us back to the issue of modernity in the context of tradition. In a very thorough survey of modern Indian art, Dr Geeta Kapur asked the question, what constitutes its "modernism"? She believed that Indian art should march ahead into post-modernity to generate its own authentic "political aesthetic".

Professor Harish Trivedi expanded the notion of bilingualism to comprehend the bi-traditional nature of the Indian literary landscape, no matter in what language it is articulated. He offered a critique of this post-colonial "hybridity" and its bastardized version in popular media on the basis of a conceptual distinction between the "non-nativist" and the "broadly indigenous". Dr Rimli Bhattacharya's paper was on the complex theme of the historical emergence of the "national theatre" as part of the process of theatrical modernization in India.

There were two powerful oral presentations by practising artists — Kumar Shahani from the field of filmmaking and Shrimati Chitralkha from the field of dancing — and they affirmed the need to situate modernity within an indigenous framework.

SEMINAR ON  
**Organisational and Institutional Aspects of Religious Movements**

The organizations of religions as systemic expressions of cultural symbolism along with the processes and designs of their institutionalization came in for close scrutiny and debate in a seminar on the theme held at the IIAS from 24 to 26 October 1994. The papers presented offered several alternative readings of meaning and function in the dynamic mechanisms of the popular and hieratic religious movements, specially their historical and doctrinal components, group processes, the gender question, beliefs and practices, their socio-cultural and ritualistic ethos and the conditionalities which arranged the network of interactive relations within and outside the groups of their followers, among other things. The papers also indicated the revitalizing and strengthening elements in the movements' progress which could centre in a charismatic leader and his prophetic message; in hard or soft institutions sustaining a distinct spirituality which enthused the adherents; in disruption or disjunction of identity and its re-assertion; or even in the politics of protest and dilemmas of adjustment. The social underpinnings of these religious movements, widely distributed in time and space in India, shaped the historical vision in the different presentations and cumulatively offered rich source material for a materialistic historiography of religious movements. The seminar was intended to define, among other things, "the working of religious movements in tangible terms".

The seminar began with the opening remarks of the Director, Professor Mrinal Miri, who offered a brief analysis of the theme of the seminar and its objectives. The first session was chaired by Professor J.S. Grewal.

In the first presentation, Professor R.N. Misra underscored the centrality of the *atavika* ("forest-based") systems and their rudimentary configurations in outlining the beginnings and early phases of the Saiva Siddhanta movement in central India. He interpreted the militant asceticism and expansionist monachism of the sect and its ever-expanding, exclusive sacred space in the context of historical specificities of the land, people and cultures of the region.

Professor Joseph T. O'Connell defined "institutions" in terms of a

social structure which organized its members by implicating a set of crucially significant devotional value orientations.

Dr Sumanta Banerjee analysed individual as well as group practices and rituals in the popular Karta-Bhaja sect of 19th century Bengal, founded by Aulchand. He attributed its vitality and resilience simultaneously to its multi-faceted popular ideology as expressed in its syncretism, a pervasively eclectic character and its rural as well as urban base.

Professor B.B. Chaudhury outlined a critique of the concept and connotations of millenarianism in religious movements. He discussed its indigenous components in the ideologies of certain indigenous tribal communities in colonial eastern India whose ethnically derived perceptions inspired them to pursue their objective and project a political identity through dissent.

In his presentation Professor J.S. Grewal discussed the ideological foundations of *dharamsal* as sacred space and traced the beginning of the idea back to the time of Guru Nanak. Emphasizing the active role of its symbolism in Sikhism, he outlined this symbolic institution in terms of its being symptomatic of leadership and authority. His study unfolded the stakes in and dynamics of controlling that sacred space, thereby implicating the power relations which made the symbolic sacred space tangible and active.

In the second presentation Professor Indu Banga dealt at length with different life-cycle rituals in the Arya Samaj sect and their ideological framework.

Professor John C.B. Webster described the rural Dalit conversion movement involving the Chuhras in Punjab from the period of the First World War through the national movement down to the establishment of Indian secular democracy.

Professor R.K. Jain's presentation was on the text and context of schisms in Jainism. He dealt with the politico-economic and historical contexts of Jainism from the medieval period down to the present and the schisms which ratified the doctrinal cleavages in the faith.

Dr Vijaya Ramaswamy in her presentation traced the marginal role of women in Indian religious history and their general subordination every-

where except in the Varkhari faith, including its Mahanubhava and Ramadasi sects, between the 13th and 17th centuries, which conceded to women saints some power and privileges, mobility and even administrative control of *maths*. Eventually, even in these sects, she said, the pressure of patriarchal norms, growing elitism and 'nationalistic' consciousness of a politically ascendant ideology proved to be instrumental in subverting women's status and position of primacy.

In the next presentation Dr Mahesh Sharma discussed the spatio-dynamic arrangements of the circulation network (*tirthas*) with the Jalandhara *pitha* in Kangra and its canonization. The dynamism of the network in terms of creating an alternative sacred geography and its validation within that arrangement were closely outlined to underscore the sacredness of the pilgrimage centres as well as the primacy of the pilgrims who upheld them.

Dr Saurabh Dube covered the rites, rituals and practices in the organizational set-up of the Satnamis in colonial central India in which were embedded the assertions of their identity and exclusivity and which were assiduously maintained in symbolic expressions and objective practices.

Dr Fanindam Deo's presentation covered the organizational patterns of the Mahima Dharma of 19th-century Orissa. Originally a tribal protest movement of colonial Orissa, it turned sacred in time, deifying the founder and formulating its own mythic tradition devoid of a written canon or a lineage of saints but strong in prophetic message. The details traced its concerted propagation despite schisms in which the groups of ascetics (*kaupinadharis* and *valkaladharis*) professed their own brands of asceticism in the absence of any well-established central authority.

The concluding presentation was Dr Ishita Banerjee Dube's paper on the travels of Lord Jagannath of Puri. It counterposed political and juridical institutions with the temple deity and indicated the competitive rivalry and factional claims about the management of temple activities. The details brought out the long-drawn-out political and juridical interventions which impinged upon the roles and right of the local *raja*, exacerbated the anxieties of the British power and those of a cross-section of Orissan people and their sympathizers outside the province.

**Colloquium on  
 Theorizing Secularism**

A two-day colloquium on the problem of secularism in India was held on 29 and 31 October 1994. The idea of the colloquium grew out of the papers on the theme published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* by Dr Akeel Biligami, Dr Partha Chatterjee, and Dr Rajeev Bhargava. The participants in the discussion included Shri Achin Vanaik, Professor Javeed Alam and Dr Alok Rai. Besides these scholars, who made oral presentations, the Fellows of the IIAS took part in the discussions that followed the presentations.

Three broad trends could be seen to dominate the discussions. While Dr Biligami, Dr Chatterjee, Professor Javeed Alam and Shri Vanaik may be said to have articulated left positions of varying degrees of commitment, Dr Bhargava took a position which may be designated liberal but to the left. Dr Rai took a position which was somewhat eclectic. The central issue with which all the participants grappled was: What meaning, role and historical effectiveness can the doctrine of secularism have in a country dominated by strong pre-modern communal/religious identities and practices? In other words, the question was how a secularist programme can come to terms with the ground reality of communal life. Dr Bhargava felt that a liberal political framework can manage the problem in terms of the principle of rights-bearing individuals or rights-bearing collectivities. The other group wanted a modification in the liberal framework. Their broad suggestion was that communal or other fragmenting identities could not be wished away but they could be radicalized or democratized by appropriate political praxis. Thus they argued for new ways of conceptualizing and practising politics to re-locate communal politics.

Dr Alok Rai raised the question of politics of identity but conceded that identity was a process and needed to be de-essentialized as a category. In that case, the issue would be one of bringing about conditions under which an identity suitable for a democratic and humanistic society might emerge.

## STUDY WEEK ON THE CONCEPT OF MINORITIES

A study week was held at the Institute under the auspices of the Inter-University Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences from 6 to 10 November 1994. The study week explored the concept of minority from different perspectives and examined its implications for political theory and practice in the Indian context.

Exploring the purpose, Professor D.L. Sheth, the convenor, said that he was convinced that the world of activism could do with some theoretical clarity. Since political discourse derives its normative terms from theory, the lack of theoretical clarity can often lead to political error. While the question of minorities has acquired considerable importance in the last few years, the terms of discourse on this issue leave much to be desired. In his inaugural remarks, Professor Mrinal Miri referred to some of the larger philosophical issues involved in contemporary discussions on minority rights. He suggested that the dangers of epistemic relativism implicit in certain kinds of communitarian claims can be overcome by evolving a notion of rationality which is historically and culturally given, yet offers the possibility of transcending its own limits.

Dr Gurpreet Mahajan argued that the concept of minority is wedded to procedural democracy (as against the richer notion of participatory democracy) and minority rights are theoretically incompatible with the claims of liberal democracy. Dr Rajeev Bhargava presented a different view. He asked the question: Should we abandon the majority-minority framework? Answering in the negative, he pointed out that identities are a product of constitutive attachments which, in India, were derived from religious communities. Drawing a distinction between a "majority-minority syndrome" and a "majority-minority framework", he contended that while it is desirable to give up the former, it is neither feasible nor desirable to get rid of the latter.

The papers by Professors Dipankar Gupta and Imtiaz Ahmad questioned the received notion of minority as a natural entity, internally homogenous and distinct from a majority. Drawing examples from Bombay and Punjab, Professor Dipankar Gupta argued that our recent experience is best seen not as the emergence of minorities, but as a

process of "minoritization". Contemporary Indian secularism is a "heroic thought which has failed to come to terms with this reality".

Professor Imtiaz Ahmad's analysis of the changing political and social aspirations of Indian Muslims posited that the concept of minority is a limiting framework within which to discuss the Muslims in India. The present situation, where they are viewed as a minority even by themselves, is a product of a long historical process. The result of this is that while the differential impact of the processes of development on different strata among Muslims points to the possibility of moving towards a composite nationalism, the Muslim elite and the state continue to foster a totalizing minority identity of the Muslims. He saw a trend towards regionalization and the renewed emphasis on community voluntarism as significant tendencies among Muslims in India, whose aspirations continue to be security, identity and visibility.

In a lively debate which followed, Professor Aijaz Ahmad emphasized that we must not overlook the role of the politics of Hindutva in recent years. If Muslims in India today are a single community, it is only with reference to Hindu communalism.

Ms Madhu Kishwar's paper dealt with the politics of majoritarianism and how it works through fears and prejudices. There were two papers on the legal-constitutional aspects of the idea of minority rights. Professor Iqbal Ansari traced the various stages of the debates on minority rights in the Constituent Assembly. Dr Abdulrahim Vijapur's paper outlined a comparative perspective of international and democratic law on the issue of minorities and human rights.

Further interesting points of comparison were offered by Professors Madhavan Palat and Giri Deshingkar in their papers on the minorities question in the erstwhile Soviet Union and China. Both papers indicated the decisive role of the communist state in determining not only the fate but also the identity of the minorities.

Other participants in the Study Week were Dr Ajay Mehra, Mr Anil Nauria, Ms Madhulika Banerjee, Dr Valerian Rodrigues, Mr Vijaya Partap and Dr Yogendra Yadav.

## INTERROGATING POST-COLONIALISM

An international seminar on "Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context" was held at the IIAS on 3-5 October 1994, in collaboration with the Indian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (IACLALS). Participants included three academics from Australia (including two Fijian-Indians now living there) and one from Canada (also an Indian emigrant). There were approximately twenty participants from all over India, besides many fellows of the Institute. In all, twenty-six papers were presented. The seminar began with a welcome by Professor Mrinal Miri, and two key statements on the theme by Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee and Professor C.D. Narasimhaiah. The wide range of the issues taken up at the seminar is broadly indicated by the titles of successive sessions. These were "Post-colonial Parameters" (papers by Arun P. Mukherjee and Vijay Mishra), "Centre and Periphery" (Richard Allen in absentia, S.K. Sareen and Akshaya Kumar), "Migrancy and Diaspora" (Satendra Nandan, Satish Aikant and C. Vijaysree), "Post-colonial Practice" (Debjani Ganguly, Makarand Paranjape, and T. Vijay Kumar), "Myth and History" (T.N. Dhar, Rita Kothari and Gareth Griffiths), "English and the Indian Languages" (K. Srilata, Vijaya Ramaswamy and Jaidev), "Indian English/'english'" (Pushpinder Syal and G.J.V. Prasad), "Third World and Nation" (Rekha Pappu, Jasbir Jain and K.C. Belliappa) and, finally, "Views from India" (Sudhir Kumar and Harish Trivedi). The seminar ended with concluding remarks by Mrinal Miri and a vote of thanks by S.K. Sareen.

Of the various aspects of post-colonialism, one which tended to predominate was exile and diaspora, which wasn't surprising given the eminence and eloquence of the several diasporic participants. Another issue which recurred even more persistently was just how, and where, to locate ourselves in India vis-a-vis post-colonialism, which was currently all the rage in the West, and some of whose manifestations were not so different really from forms of neo-colonialism. It was debated whether it was best by and large to ignore it and let it blow over, or to demand a greater and fairer representation for India in this discourse, or to seek to complement and balance this

metropolitan discourse with a native and indigenous one. An especially vexed question was that of language. If English (or, in characteristic post-colonial spelling, "english") was to be the lingua franca of post-colonial discourse, were not all pre-colonial languages (from Sanskrit to Urdu, in our case) under the threat of elision or even erasure? But, on the other hand, how many of these languages remained substantially unmarked or uncontaminated by English anyhow?

All these issues, and various others, formed the stuff of energetic and impassioned debate through the three days, but an equally rewarding dimension of the seminar was what followed in the evenings. On the last afternoon, most participants went on a scenic coach-ride to Kufri and Phagu, but some were still so excited and wound up as to prefer to argue with each other than to look out of the window. In fact, even after the after-dinner sessions, participants dispersed only to reassemble in smaller groups now in a room here and now in a corridor or on a landing of the grand staircase there, and there was much to-ing and fro-ing at all hours.

The magnificent building itself was (so to say) problematized and made part of the agenda of the seminar, especially by participants from abroad. Richard Allen of Britain (who couldn't in the even make it) was the first to notice a historical irony in a seminar on post-colonialism being held in a building which was till the other day the Viceregal Lodge and thus the sanctum sanctorum of colonialism. Even the respective positions and prominence of the large portraits of Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore and Ambedkar, which now adorn the Conference Hall, were ideologically deconstructed. Satendra Nandan, a poet and novelist from Fiji/Australia, was at first struck by the colonial size and opulence of the rooms he had been given, but then promptly set to work to find out who occupied the biggest suite of all, Lady Curzon's. (Curzon himself, we learnt, lived some distance away in a cottage still named after him.) "The place was seeing us," Nandan later wrote, "even as we were seeing the place."

All in all, then, it was a packed and lively seminar, vigorously interactive, and infected (even if ironically) by the very spirit and ambience of its apt venue. Selected papers from the seminar will be published in a book being edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee and Harish Trivedi.