

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.

THE INTERPRETATION OF LITERARY TEXTS

A research seminar sponsored by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study and organized by the Department of English, Gauhati University, was held from the 21 to 26 November, 1994. The seminar was inaugurated by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Dr N.K. Choudhury. In her brief introduction to the topic the convenor, Dr Anita Baruah Sarmah, stressed the importance of openness and plurality in interpretation in the current post-modern climate.

The first day of the seminar was devoted entirely to New Historicism and its impact on interpretation. During the morning session Professor P.C. Kar presented the key paper 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 new critical and deconstructionist approaches. Building his paper around Greenblatt's seminal concept of "resonance" and the New Historicist 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". He stressed the need to "redefine the meaning of context as both determined by the contingencies of the text's original moment of production and its displacement to a new location charged with fresh resonance".

During the afternoon session, chaired by Professor Kar, two papers on New Historicism were presented. "Historicism Effaces History: Phenomenology of Literary Texts", co-authored by Sukalpa Bhattacharjee and Prasenjit Biswas, applied historicist ideas derived from Benjamin, Jameson, Derrida and Greenblatt to read Third World texts like Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*. The second paper, by Sumanyu Sathpathy, examined the assumptions behind New Historicism regarding the interpretation of a literary text as a historical document.

In the first session of the second day, Professor K.N. Phukan presented his paper, "Text, Meaning and Interpretation: An Overview of Critical Thought", working on the assumption 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. The session chaired by Professor Phukan began with a presentation by Pori Hiloidari, "Metaphors and Metonymies in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*: A Deconstructionist Reading". The

second paper, "Restoring the Text: A Classroom View" by Rajat Bhattacharya, carried on the spirit of the morning in pleading for the necessity of stable meaning. The third presentation by Bharat Bhusan Mohanty, "Writing a Text: A Brief Study of Barthes' Interpretation of Text", concentrated on Barthes' role in freeing the text through certain important concepts. In the fourth presentation, "Restoration of Text in Ancient India and the Role of the Commentators", Malinee Goswami discussed the methods adopted by commentators in the restoration, reconstruction and preservation of ancient Sanskrit and Prakrit texts.

On the third day, during the first session Professor Dilip Barua gave a free-ranging talk on the status of interpretation after the proliferation of various linguistic philosophies starting with Saussure's distinction of language and parole and of the division of the sign into the signifier and the signified.

The second session of the third day, chaired by Professor Kar, started with "Interpretation of Text: A Problem of Translation", by L. Biswanath Sharma, which suggested that translation is complicated by the fact that a literary work, besides having a universal element which might obstruct communication if translated literally and which must therefore be interpreted for the target language. The second paper, by Anil Boro, "The Text in Translation", situated the problem in the classroom, in the need to provide a translation of English texts to students who are not equipped to grapple with the subtleties of a foreign tongue.

The third presentation, "Feminism and the Text" by K.C. Baral, based itself on the feminist's encounter with post-structuralist questioning of the unified subject, the centre and the self, and their subsequent grouping into those who use such theories to erase the author and subvert patriarchal authority and those who argue that such a concession will erase the woman's identity as author or reader. The final paper of this session, "Feminist Critical Practice and the Idea of a Male Medusa" by Liza Das, aptly enough, tackled the question of whether a male can be a feminist critic. In the morning session of the fourth day, Professor M.L. Raina mounted a trenchant attack on theories that have decentred the text in favour of the critic's discourse on the text. His paper, dramatically titled "Who Killed the

Text?", pleaded for a return to a position where the text has a meaningful existence, exclusive of the linguistic pyrotechnics that might be unleashed upon it.

During the second session, chaired by Professor Raina, three papers were read. The first, "Resentment as a Critical Position: The Post-Colonial Critic" by Nandana Dutta, noted the popularity of the us/them syndrome in post-colonial critiques and sought to question, through the familiar Western text of *Huckleberry Finn*, whether a more rigorous critical position can be achieved. The second paper, by Krishna Barua, used Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* to illustrate the continued possibility of an androgynous interpretation of literary texts. In her presentation, "Reading Richard Wright's *Native Son*", Aparna Bhattacharyya established her own marginal context as a reader before going on to discuss Wright's treatment of black women, specifically the treatment meted out by black men to their women, which shows an unconscious bias towards the position taken by white men themselves.

On the fifth day Professor Birendranath Datta opened up an entirely new dimension 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 folklorist studies. He provided excellent examples of the oral tradition passing into the written one in the *Katha Guru Charita*, a prose biography of the great neo-Vaishnava saints Sankaradeva and Madhava-deva (15th to 16th centuries). Professor Datta suggested that in literate cultures textuality involves interplay between the written and the oral.

In the first paper of the second session on translation, "Transference of the Cultural Moment or Is Literature a View from Nowhere?", Pradip Acharya discussed the fact that there is no transcendent luminous moment but that the 'empty space' between the lines becomes the utopian space for primary deliberations before the text of the source language is transferred to the text of the target language. The second paper, by Ranjita Choudhury, "The Literary Text and Its Interpretation: The Text in Performance", suggested that the reading of a text is a dynamic process of recreation. The third paper, "Text, Performance, Interpretation and the Problems of Pedagogy" by 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. The session was chaired by Professor Birendranath Datta.

On the sixth and final day there was just one session. Professor Birendranath Gohain in his presentation, "Validity of Interpretation" 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 should use his newly acquired critical tools with discrimination.

Dr. Bh. Krishnamurthy, eminent linguist and a former Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Hyderabad, was a Visiting Professor at the Institute in May, 1994. He delivered three lectures at the Institute. In the First Lecture, he discussed the official language policies in India, focusing on the historical and constitutional dimensions. He concluded with two recommendations: (1) the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution should include all the Indian languages which command one lakh speakers or (2) the Eighth Schedule should be scrapped and all languages with one lakh population should be developed by the respective governments as a matter of official policy.

The second lecture focused on the question of mother tongue as a medium of education. After a detailed historical survey of official policy on the issue, he offered a critique of this policy. He concluded with specific policy recommendations. The regional language should be extended as a medium of education at all levels, including professional courses, while simultaneously English input as an instrument of practical use should be progressively increased.

In his third and final lecture, he discussed the form and function of English from an overall national perspective. He was severely opposed to English becoming an instrument of elite dominance in India. He criticised the use of English as a medium of instruction on the ground that it tended to cripple the development of Indian languages. But English still has its uses as a medium of communication with the outside world, can therefore be a second or third language.