



Jnanappravaha

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER Jan-Mar '16



Quarterly Newsletter

As the year comes to a close, it is a moment of reflection and contemplation. We look back with a degree of quiet satisfaction and look forward with much anticipation. This newsletter will attest to a formidable quarter in terms of ideas, insights and a breadth of subject matter ranging from Post Colonial Theory, Notions of Desire, Charisma and Norms, to Indo-Iranian Numismatics, 20th century American Art and Literature and Pre-Modern Classical Indian Art. International scholars of great repute have helped us traverse difficult terrains of philosophy and critical theory along with the art historical study of objects and material culture.

We have added yet another section to the newsletter titled “Outside the Box” to keep our readers informed of our participation in various fora both nationally and internationally. Our Academic Director Rohit Goel presented papers in a Lacan conference in Beirut as well as one on the Anthropocene in Cuttack. As part of the Mumbai LitFest, I was in conversation with Wendy Doniger and Arshia Sattar on The Power of Myth. All these along with a few others are part of this section. Another addition to our academic programmes is titled Theoretical Foundations under which we will attempt to defog difficult and challenging aspects of critical theory. So do look out for these announcements.

We look forward to having you in our midst and wish you good health, happiness and serenity for 2016.



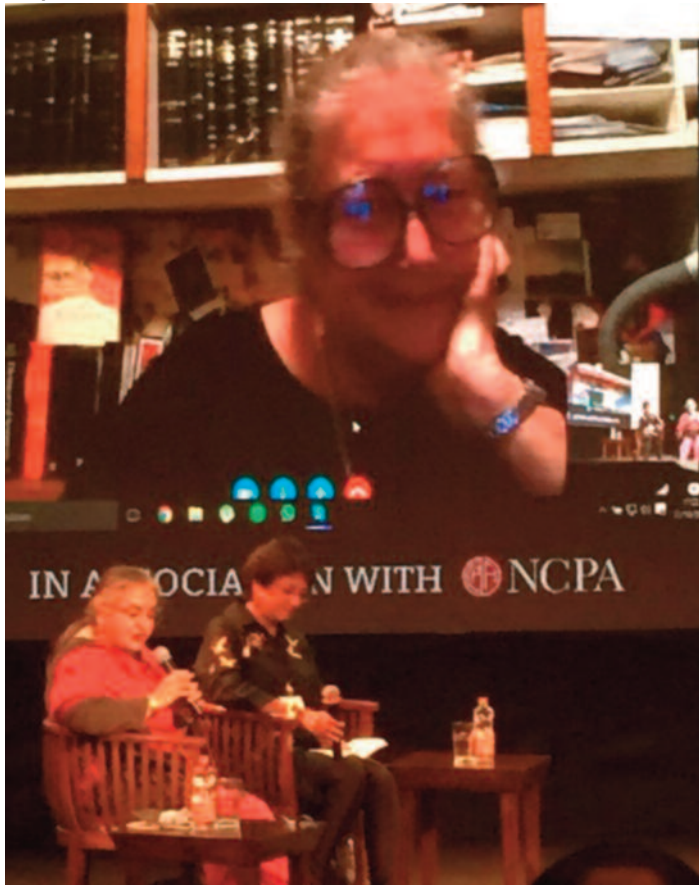
Rashmi Poddar PhD.

Director

Outside the Box

The Power of Myth

(October 31, 2015) *Rashmi Poddar, Wendy Doniger & Arshia Sattar in Conversation*
On occasion of the Tata Literature Festival at The Experimental Theatre, NCPA



What is myth? Why has it captivated the human imagination through history and across geographies? How have the contexts within

which it is perceived emerged and evolved?

These questions, among others, were addressed in a conversation between Indic scholars and Sanskritists Rashmi Poddar, Director of Jnanapravaha Mumbai, and Wendy Doniger, Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of History of Religions at the University of Chicago, moderated by Arshia Sattar, noted Indian translator and lecturer on South Asian literatures, as part of the Tata Literature Festival at the NCPA's Experimental Theatre.

While there are arguably as many definitions of myth as there are myths themselves, the simplest is as follows: myths are narratives whose signification amplifies and diversifies over time and across space. The narratives that find expression as myth provide insight into the mechanisms and purpose of creation, natural phenomena, human existence, desire, illness, and death.

Moreover, the effort to contain myth within a narrative 'situation' is fraught with ambiguity. Myth is an event that is a cause of itself; its 'original' author cannot be identified. However, while Prof. Doniger argued that certain 'core' narratives of the human condition were proliferated and particularized over time by various communities and sects, Dr. Poddar contended that folktales and tribal stories were consolidated into paradigmatic narratives as civilizations emerged from a cluster of societies.

Importantly, the power of myth is the power of language. If a myth is to elicit profound emotional experience, the relationships of language through which it is constructed cannot be purely grammatical. Between word and meaning, a subtle orchestration of tension and harmony must prevail in all literary renditions of myth. Mythic language is poetic: it is the language of the everyday sharpened and clarified, in places quickened, at times stilled.

As such, mythic narrative and language constitute a paradigm that runs parallel to that of rational and scientific thought. As a system of knowledge, myth does not subscribe to the logic of progression that is crucial to scientific ontology. Myth continually re-presents and resuscitates pasts made obsolete by scientific discourse. Indeed, as an epistemic category myth is anathema to the principles upheld by rationality. Moreover, in a mediated age that privileges Reality TV, documentaries, and biographies, rumor and stereotypes are classified as 'myths' that needs to be 'busted'.

At the other extreme, however, myth can be pressed into the service of ideology. The characters, temporalities, and plot lines myths describe, the bhavas they engage, provide placeholders for the particularities of identitarian politics. Nonetheless, it would be unwise to suggest that myth anticipates such a context and that it should, along with the ideologies that appropriate it, be consigned to the realm of 'false-consciousness'.

To conclude, all other parameters considered, if the word as form and meaning, as idea and

image, is to qualify as myth, it must, as Jeanette Winterson puts it, be "powered enough for its flight...The word, to be read by male and female, young and old, to be read as high culture or original sin will have to stare back at every pair of eyes set upon it, will not wear thin through too much use...The word...will have to hold its own...as chanted, as whispered, as defamed, as ignored, as seized, as libeled, as sung into a hymn of praise..." Myth will always be a quest for it has always been a question. - S.H.

Lacan contra Foucault: Subjectivity, Universalism, Politics

(December 2, 3 & 4, 2015) by Rohit Goel
at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon



Jnanapravaha Mumbai's Academic Director Rohit Goel travelled to Beirut, Lebanon in December 2015 to give two lectures. His first lecture contributed to a conference at the American University of Beirut on 'Lacan contra Foucault: Subjectivity, Universalism, Politics', which brought together leading philosophers from around the world – including Joan Copjec,

Mladen Dolar, and Alenka Zupančič – working on Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. Prof. Goel's talk, 'Exchanging Memory: Reflections on Postwar Enjoyment', used the example of Lebanon to show how memory of past atrocity is a fetish object of useless enjoyment that overshoots the very need it at once constructs and aims to satisfy: avoiding the repetition of past violence. Putting Lacan's theory of discourse into conversation with Marx's analysis of value in capital, he argued that postwar 'transitional' justice mechanisms, hegemonic after 1989, steer toward the perpetual accumulation of knowledge about the past — what Lacan calls surplus-enjoyment or *jouissance* or *a* and Marx calls surplus-value — at the expense of working through history to overcome the recurrence of social antagonism. Reading Lacan with Marx to analyze 'late capitalism' or postwar liberal society, he suggested, offers a high stakes corrective to structuralist and poststructuralist pronouncements of 'the death of the subject'. For instance, Michel Foucault's diagnosis of the nexus of knowledge and power as absolute tends to a politics of silence in the face of necessarily alienating discourses (on madness, criminalization, sexuality...), either retreating to a 'care of the self' or self-consciously refusing to engage the constitutive contradictions of discourse for fear of reproducing the latter's terms/potency. Prof. Goel concluded by suggesting alternatives to liberal transitional justice programs as well as structuralist/poststructuralist subject annihilation in the aftermath of catastrophe. - R.G.

The City in the City: Cosmopolis Beirut

(December 10, 2015), *by Rohit Goel*
Sursock Museum, Beirut, Lebanon

Prof. Goel also gave a talk, 'Sectarianism as Symptom', with Prof. Nadia Bou Ali (American University of Beirut) at the recently reopened Sursock Museum in Beirut. Typically, sectarianism is considered negatively, as the cause of social division or civil war. As such, artists, journalists, scholars, political elites, and citizens in postwar Lebanon have worked to foster reconciliation between the country's sects, an effort to avoid the repetition of civil war. Indeed, Ahmad Gharbieh and Mona Harb, the two other speakers on the panel, offered presentations on everyday negotiations of public space in Beirut and new practices of leisure and consumption in the city's south suburbs, with the aim of forging alternative spaces for alliances in an increasingly fractured nation-state. In contrast, Profs Goel and Bou Ali argued that sectarianism is a symptom of actually existing divisions in the



Sursock Museum, Beirut

postwar landscape (between classes, sects, genders...) that are incommensurable and hence cannot be reconciled; rather they must be overcome through political praxis. Redefining sectarianism as partisanship, commitment, and love in the age of neoliberalism, in the 'end of history', they concluded their talk with a call for postwar Lebanese to stop enjoying or repressing the symptom of sectarianism – to 'tarry with the negative' instead. - R.G.

Curriculum Conclave

CSMVS in collaboration with JNAF
(December 17, 2015) with Manisha Patil, Rashmi Poddar, Nancy Adajania, Mustansir Dalvi, Kaiwan Mehta and Ranjit Hoskote

CSMVS in collaboration with JNAF

'Curriculum Conclave', a symposium organized by the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) and the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation (JNAF) was held in relation to the exhibition 'Unpacking the Studio: Celebrating the Jehangir Sabavala Bequest' currently on view at the Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, CSMVS.

The event brought a number of eminent scholars from diverse disciplines into conversation: Dr. Rashmi Poddar, Director of Jnanapravaha Mumbai, Mustansir Dalvi, architect and poet, Nancy Adajania, cultural theorist and curator, Kaiwan Mehta, architect, author and urban researcher and art historian Dr. Manisha Patil. Poet, curator, art critic and cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote moderated the discussion.

As the abstract announcing the event stated,

the symposium sought to address the urgent need for the development of a considered, coherent curriculum that would systematize modes of art pedagogy in Visual Art schools and para-academic spaces in India devoted to the study of the humanities and social sciences. The symposium discussed the attributes of "an optimal curriculum for a school of arts, the education of an artist across diverse disciplines and domains, and the efforts being made by various institutions and platforms in this direction."

In particular, Dr. Poddar highlighted aspects of the seminal and dynamic role played by Jnanapravaha Mumbai— an inter-disciplinary institution, independent of the university system— in disseminating definitive global research in the disciplines of art history, visual culture, critical theory and the social sciences. A series titled 'Creative Processes' offers internationally recognized visual artists, authors and practitioners of the performing arts an opportunity to share unique, personal perspectives on the modes of intellectual engagement made manifest in their artistic practices.

The Post-Graduate Diploma in 'Indian Aesthetics' constitutes the foundational program of the institute. This course provides an understanding of pre-modern Indian artistic practices through the lens of key Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Brahmanical and Tantric tenets as well as complex theoretical texts on shastric aesthetic concepts. This pedagogical model departs from a paradigm that privileges a chronological and stylistic analysis of art objects. Moreover, the

recently introduced seminar series titled 'Theoretical Foundations' offers a systematic and overarching understanding of specific intellectual practices that comprise the discipline of critical theory.

In all, mentioned here are simply some of the attributes of an institution that provides a productive model for a rich, diverse and rigorous engagement with cultural practices that complicate an understanding of what it means to be human. - S.H.

The Wider Significance of Nature

(December 20-23, 2015) *by Rohit Goel*
Forum on Contemporary Theory (Baroda) and
the Departments of English and History,
Ravenshaw University (Cuttack, Orissa)



Jnanapravaha Mumbai's Academic Director Rohit Goel traveled to Cuttack, Orissa to contribute to a conference on 'The Wider Significance of Nature' organized by the Forum on Contemporary Theory (Baroda) and the Departments of English and History at Ravenshaw University and convened by

Jnanapravaha Mumbai International Advisory Council Member and Columbia University Professor of Philosophy Akeel Bilgrami. Prof. Goel gave a plenary lecture titled, 'Capitalism is Ecological Catastrophe: Some Notes on the Anthropocene', in which he argued that at least since the early 2000s, the social sciences and humanities have witnessed a veritable explosion of discourse on the 'anthropocene'. Regnant academic interventions have rejected Marx's understanding of humanity's relation to nature as alienated in capitalist society: Marx argued that in capitalist society, the objects of human activity in and on the world are lost to human subjects at the very moment of their production. Instead, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Bruno Latour, Timothy Mitchell, and Elizabeth Povinelli, to name a few, have responded to the so-called anthropocene by treating nature as itself a subject of history. Their 'geostories' animate plants, animals, rocks, etc. as agents vying with 'other' human subjects in a struggle for survival. Prof. Goel resuscitated a Marxian understanding of the subject (human)/object (natural) distinction, as well as its alienated character in capitalist society, arguing that overcoming capital is crucial to resisting ecological catastrophe. - R.G.

A fuller account of 'The Wider Significance of Nature' conference will appear in the Slant/Stance section of our next newsletter.

Indian Aesthetics

The course on Indian Aesthetics in the past few months had engaged in detail with various areas of Indian Philosophy, and the way philosophical developments and ideas are reflected in the material culture across different historical periods. Jainism as a world view followed the detailed study of Buddhism as a monastic culture as well as its philosophical journey. Jainism was studied through the primary motif of the Veera Rasa - understanding life-

journeys of the Tirthankaras and the emerging traditions of iconography, narrative references in visual schemes as well as architectural developments. This was followed by detailed expositions on the ideas and journeys of characters such as Vishnu and Shiva, as well as Devi and Shakti. Detailed iconographic studies and observations were coupled with readings of ritual practices, as well as archaeological understandings to get the full breadth of how art



Relief panel, Elephanta, Cave no. 1

is the site where philosophy and theology meet everyday life. It is evident that art encompasses the material manifestation of the world of thoughts, magic, as well as conceptual narratives which shaped the way one engages with the world, it's nature, and human civilisation.

The sessions on temple architecture further enhanced the need to approach the idea of how physical environments were shaped, where humans engage with the natural as well as the cosmic. Iconography builds a narrative through spatial organisation and schemes to generate a micro-image of the world - the world as understood through specific philosophies and world-views. The quarter ended with a detailed study of Sufi and Islamic thought and its specific journey within the Indian subcontinent. Geometry, ornamentation, as well as the art of story-telling came to the fore as ways of understanding the cultures that human societies produced and built in their attempts to converse with the world of Gods as well as humans. – K.M.

Religious Movements in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands, c. 400-700AD: Evidence from Hūṇa and related coinages

(October 16, 2015) *by Shailendra Bhandare*

Dr. Shailendra Bhandare, a numismatist, epigraphist, and Sanskritist, delivered a lecture to a packed hall at Jnanapravaha about Hun coinage and its impact on Brahmanical religious symbolism as well as kingly agendas.

The Huns, nomadic tribes from Central Asia, moved in a two-pronged direction, towards Europe and towards India. They eventually ruled

northern India as the Kushan Dynasty from the 1st to the 3rd centuries C.E. They are remembered as plunderers and marauders, but as Bhandare argued, this may not be entirely true.



Shailendra Bhandare speaks during 'Religious Movements in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands'

In the course of their migration and encounters with the indigenous people, they assimilated various symbols as markers of their own royalty, through which they represented themselves to their subjects. Originally the Huns were worshippers of the sky. Through the process of migration they came into contact with cultures that spoke and represented themselves – in coinage, languages, and symbols – other than their own.

The Kushan rulers took on forms of indigenous representation, adopting Pahlvi, Brahmi, and

Greek for legend on their coins and Indo-Bactrian symbols such as the Sun, Vajra, Discus, fire altar, Thunderbolt, Lotus, and Mace on their coinage. This led to the hybridization and flowering of new ideas taken from the local religious repertoire.

By the reign of Kanishka (127 – 140 C.E.) and Huvishka (160- 190 C.E.,) who ruled an empire stretching from modern day Afghanistan to Central India, Shaiva and Vaishnava symbols including Shiva in iconic form were represented on Kushan coinage.

Dr. Bhandare explained that rulers do not stick to a single kind of symbolism but draw from myriad sources to legitimize their rule. In fact, cultic subsumption that started with the Huns continued into the coinage of Bappa Rawal (734 – 753 C.E.), the founder of Mewar, on which the Bull, Shiva linga, Trident, Cow and Calf, as well as Laxmi are represented. Symbols, Bhandare argued, are interlocutors and mediators between cults and cultures. They carry the message of the rulers to the ruled. - A.R.

The Body Redux

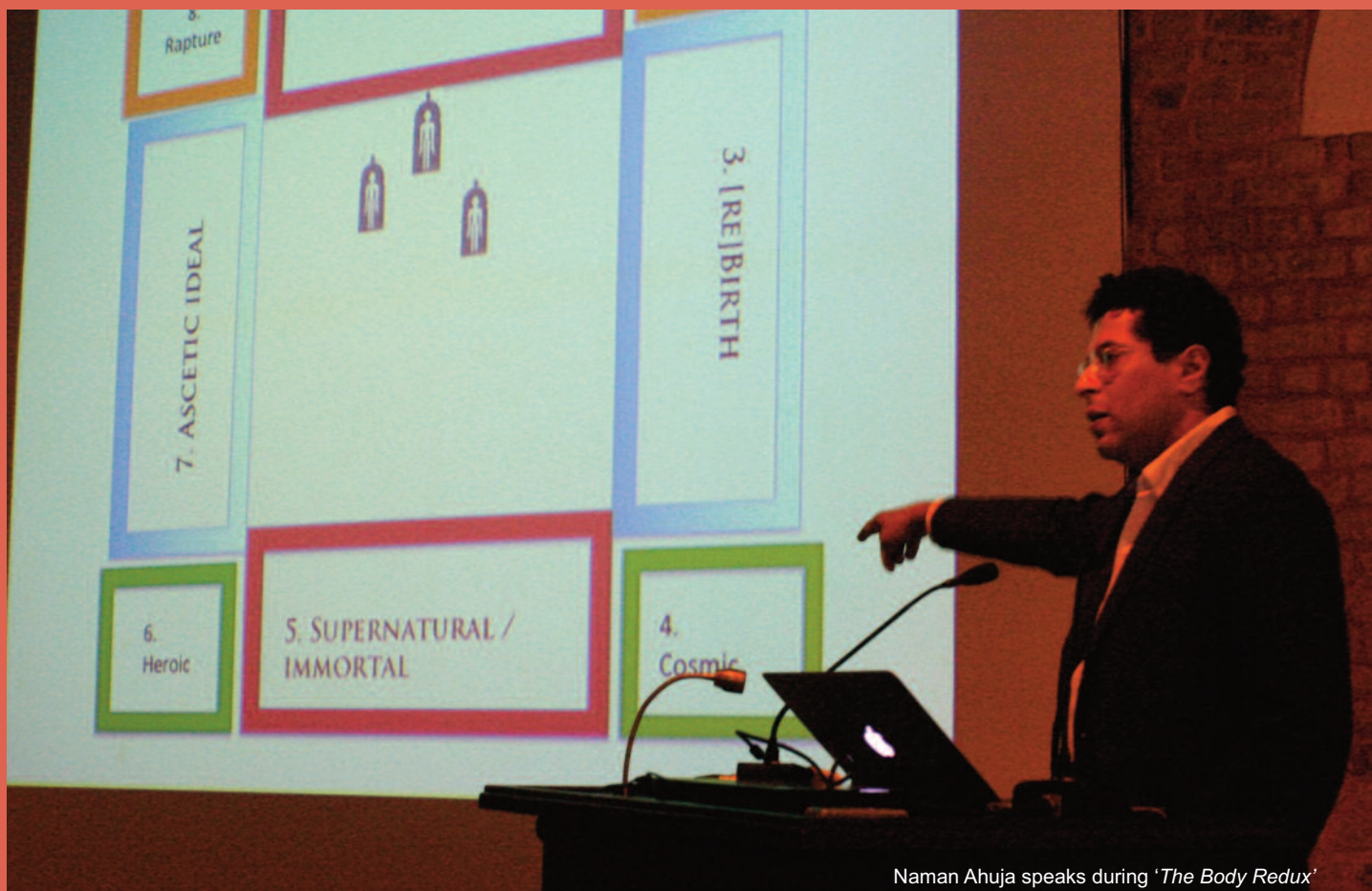
(December 14 - 18, 2015) *by Naman Ahuja*

Dr. Naman Ahuja curated 'Body in Indian Art and Thought', a celebrated exhibition for the Europalia International Arts Festival at Palais de Beaux-Arts, Brussels in October 2013, which travelled to New Delhi in March 2014. Mounted in collaboration with ICCR, this was an ambitious exhibition, bringing together over 350 objects from 55 lenders from India and abroad. The exhibitions opened to critical acclaim and saw a record number of visitors, not only because of its

curatorial approach but also because of the richness of the objects on display and the scope of the exhibition itself. Jnanapravaha Mumbai invited Dr. Ahuja to give a five-day seminar on the shows and beyond in a series titled 'The Body Redux'.

'The Body Redux' relived the exhibition, working with the eight key themes of the show while posing questions about the roles and responsibilities of museums and public art institutions to safekeep and display tangible and intangible heritage. Indian art has been admired for its beauty but most often this appraisal takes place in isolation of religious categories or taxonomy based on the nature of its forms. Dr. Ahuja brought together a range of material — sculptures, paintings, textiles, jewelry, pottery, videos, music, and much more — to examine the body in Indian art. Dr. Ahuja juxtaposed not only art works but also contexts and chronologies, relating the modern and contemporary with objects of the past. The artworks were borrowed from many important collections and obscure Indian museums. As some objects were changed for the show in New Delhi, the audience at Jnanapravaha in Mumbai had the privilege of engaging with both shows, as well as material that did not make it into either exhibition.

In curating the exhibits, Dr. Ahuja was aware of the dangers of an orientalist approach to Indian art, of its role as a representative of a vast and contested history, which he dealt with in the structure of the exhibition. The layout of the exhibition also became the plan for the seminar, as it explored each gallery and thematic, first with



Naman Ahuja speaks during 'The Body Redux'

a short film (made in collaboration with the IGNCA and produced by NDTV), followed by a lecture/discussion that addressed salient points, contexts, and curatorial perspectives on each theme. With this approach, Dr. Ahuja also drew links between the artworks and the overarching narrative of the show.

Set up like a mandala, the show had key themes: 'Death', 'Rebirth', 'The Body Ideal', 'The Body Beyond Limits of Form', and 'Rapture'. The

visitor's route followed a narrative that Dr. Ahuja replicated beautifully for the audience in Mumbai, where one saw how the galleries balanced one other in the context of the philosophy of Indian art. The layout underlined the plurality of ideology in philosophy, without privileging any one religion or belief system. The show, while sensitive to chronological and spatial particularities, deftly managed to transcend geographical boundaries and time.

The journey began with death, treating its iconography and exploring how various cultures commemorate their dead, with a particular emphasis on sati and hero stones. The transformation of an individual into a revered figure, through spectacular death in the case of sati, was discussed through mythology and painting. The art works dealt with memory, both



Sati Stone, circa 12th - 14th cent CE, Chandore, Maharashtra
Image Courtesy CEMS, University of Mumbai

personal and public. Dr. Ahuja discussed and annotated the complex ideas of martyrdom within this segment through an interpretation of *Viragal* and *Virasati*, graphic 13th century sculptures from Andhra Pradesh of heroes (male and female) committing suicide.

When we speak of the body, we also speak of nothingness and test the limits of formlessness and abstraction in various religions. *Swayambhu* or the self incarnate is worshipped both in Shaivite and Vaishnavite traditions while calligraphy, foot prints, and palm prints are venerated in Islam and Buddhism. The gallery explored many examples of this abstraction, perhaps the most apt being the 19th century Marwar painting, *From Heavenly Realms to Formlessness*.

The reality of death is challenged by an exploration of rebirth and reincarnation. The seminar examined dangerous/benevolent mothers through the sculpture of a 6th century *Lajjagauri*, effortlessly mounted next to *Basanti*, a contemporary dried hemp sculpture by Mrinalini Mukherjee. The common threads of surrogacy and myths such as miraculous birth, consistent in many religions, were highlighted so the viewer could appreciate the commonalities that exist between different belief systems.

The cosmos is extensively explored in Indian art, with astrological charts and the universe depicted in paintings and sculptures. The seminar discussed iconography of the gorgeous set of Ashta-digpalas, or the guardians of the directions from 11th to 13th century Odisha; innovative Jnana-Chaupads, made to educate Jain children

on religion and good ways of living; as well as Islamic manuscripts dealing with sun-signs and solving problems specific to them. The sheer range of this engagement is represented through a replica of the 5th-6th century Shiva with cosmic symbols sculpted on parts of the body, which is still worshipped in Chattisgarh. The range of responses to predicting the future were noted, with an elaborate chart being placed opposite a *Jyotishkavadan* 2nd century Gandharan panel, where the Buddha rescues a boy who was falsely accused of bringing bad luck from a pyre. Through these interpretations, Dr. Ahuja brought out the ways in which society questioned prevailing attitudes by documenting differences in

opinion within everyday Indian life.

Fascinating was the inclusion of the everyman and everywoman, even as the exhibition dealt with gods, goddesses and religious figures; mythology is also taken up in contemporary sculptures by artists such as Sheila Gowda, Subodh Gupta, as well as in comic books such as the *Amar Chitra Katha*. These forms have also shaped, at times problematically, the country's mythological landscape. The body was examined for what made a depiction ideal: the ideal god, the ideal *apsara*, the ideal *gana*, with many of the finest examples in Indian art history. It was not only gods, but also supernatural beings, heroes, and ascetics that were depicted with breathtaking



Manikavacakar, circa 10th cent. CE

restraint, such as the Manikavacakar 10th century Chola bronze.

The final theme of the seminar was rapture: the sculptures were breathtaking and it was in the details of the art work that one saw the sophistication and commitment of the artists. It was in this gallery that we encountered the 11th century Khajuraho *surasundaris* or nymphs, the depictions of sexual union, and ultimately a loss of self. It was here that the exhibition dissolved, quietly making a statement that it is in art that a person can truly forget oneself. The display in Brussels played with light, bathing the visitors in red and the artwork in white light, prompting questions on what was real/true and what just seemed real. The act of being possessed by the divine, of an idol or a person transcending one body, was shown through documentary footage of various performance and prayer traditions across the subcontinent. The many *raagmala* paintings on display were accompanied by corresponding music, one of which, Raag Deepak, was revived from historical musical research.

This report on the Dr. Ahuja's five-day seminar series has left out many fascinating aspects of the show and the lectures that followed; it cannot do justice to the exhibitions' depth of engagement with media, artefacts, historical narratives, biographies and ideology. Taking the body as the object of inquiry, Dr. Ahuja questioned the canon of Indian art and its reception within India and globally, offering a balanced, reflective exploration of the country. The show makes a conscious effort to bring in marginalised

communities and engage debates about gender and sexuality. Dr. Ahuja admitted that he walked a fine line in curating the exhibitions, which threatened to lead to a tangled mess of the many ways in which India sees history rather than a provocation of ideas. The body is fundamental to any way of life and every belief system, but the ways in which the body is seen, dealt with, and idealized differs greatly and challenges the canon of Indian art. The exhibition encouraged each viewer to form her own understanding and opinion of the 'ideal Indian body'. It also questioned the notion of the secular, probing problems with the writing and dissemination of Indian history in the contemporary.

One of the most significant effects of the seminar dealt with larger issues of museums in India. Many of the objects displayed were surprising choices, some from small museums and others from closed storages and private collections. The exhibition brought to light the treasures that exist in the reserves of many museums, often closed to the public and even researchers. This draws attention to the dire straits of museums and heritage management in the country, where institutions are warehouses and art lies in decrepitude.

Crucial to the experience of the lecture series was the insight into the challenges of curating a show of this scale, as Dr. Ahuja had to negotiate bureaucracy, policies, politics, historical accuracy, and ideological standpoints, while staying true to the concept of the exhibition. The seminar was an opportunity to bring out many hidden subtexts of and conversations between the artworks that a

regular visitor to the exhibition may have missed. Peppered with anecdotes — funny, dire, outrageous — Dr. Ahuja led the audience on an insightful and nuanced reading of the exhibition, provoked us to think further, and substantially added to the museums-to-see list! - A.A.

Forthcoming Programmes

'Cities of Victory': The Afterlife of Chalukya Architecture at Vijayanagara and Bijapur'

The Mirella Peteni Haggiag Deccan Heritage Foundation Lecture

(January 15, 2016, 6:30pm) by *Phillip B. Wagoner*

In collaboration with the Deccan Heritage Foundation



Detail of Chalukya column reused in the gateway to Bijapur's citadel, 1538

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, architectural historians were quick to recognize the stunning qualities of the distinctive temples associated with the Chalukyas of Kalyana (997-1200). But what about inhabitants of the Deccan in the long centuries after the collapse of the Chalukya state? How did they understand and interact with these monuments left by the bygone dynasty? This talk will present evidence pointing to the occurrence of a 'Chalukya Revival' in the sixteenth century, as rulers of competing, would-be imperial powers reused Chalukya building components, and in some cases even entire structures, in their own architectural projects. In part, the attraction was aesthetic, but more importantly, it stemmed from the imperial associations of the Chalukyas as the last great dynasty to have ruled the entirety of the Deccan. This positive and active reception of Chalukya architecture was shared alike by the 'Adil Shahi rulers of the sultanate of Bijapur, and the Aravidu rulers of Vijayanagara.

Adorning the Goddess: Reading Alankara in the Tamil Srivaishnava Traditions

(January 18, 2016, 6:30pm) by *Archana Venkatesan*

A ubiquitous feature of Tamil temple ritual is the elaborate ornamentation and decoration of the body of god (alankara), particularly that of the processional image (utsava murti). This lecture will argue that alankara, the decoration of the body of the deity is a process and practice that both reveals and conceals. Taking as a case-study the Tamil Srivaishnava tradition more

broadly and the Andal temple in Srivilliputtur, Tamil Nadu, in particular, Archana Venkatesan will demonstrate how alankara is used to create meaning and experience for the devotee. Ornamentation serves as both decoration and disguise, an irresistible lure to the devotee to relish the body of god.



For the Srivaishnavas, alankara is an invitation to contemplation, a form of experiential commentary that directs the devotee to a theological understanding of god's nature, of his vastness, and of his mercurial and chimerical character.

WESTERN AESTHETICS

Ut pictura poesis: the Painter in the Poet **Derek Walcott**

(October 27, 2015) by John Van Sickle

John Van Sickle – Professor of Classics at Brooklyn College and of Classical Studies and Comparative Literature at the Graduate Center of CUNY – delivered a remarkable lecture at Jnanapravaha on the St. Lucian poet, playwright, and essayist Derek Walcott, the Nobel laureate for literature in 1992. Prof. Van Sickle paid particular attention to the ways in which Walcott treats imagery through poetry, titling his talk '*Ut pictura poesis: the Painter in the Poet Derek Walcott*'. Writing of his close friend and leading St. Lucian painter Dunstan St. Omer, whose work melded iconography from the Roman Catholic tradition with local visions of the island, Walcott maintained, 'I lived in a different gift, its element metaphor'.

Prof. Van Sickle explained how Walcott masterfully mobilizes this gift in his epic *Omeros* (1990), which interweaves themes of love, strife, suffering, and exile, capturing the diasporic Caribbean experience of forced migration, which Van Sickle described as 'paradise lost'. Rather than particularize the colonial experience of St. Lucia, the historical subject of a tug-of-war between the French and the British, Walcott places his own reflections on the island into conversation with writers as spatially and temporally diverse as Homer, Shakespeare, Joyce, Dante, Vergil, as well as modern poets, popular speeches, and songs. *Omeros* explores



John Van Sickle speaks during 'Ut pictura poesis: The Painter in the Poet Derek Walcott'

vast swaths of space and time, interrogating the success and failure of journeys and empires (Britain, Venice, and Rome) through the metaphors of redemption and disappointment, birth and death, and love and suffering.

Walcott uses metaphor to elucidate the complex history of human movement, colonization, settlement, and resistance in both the Old and New Worlds, paying mind to the historical repetition of the suffering of the indigenous and the fall of Empires. Indeed, these repetitions pushed Walcott to question the desire to write new texts and produce new images. *Omeros* is a powerful statement that the repetition of tragedy in history demands that we

become better readers rather than writers; indeed, the epic can be viewed as a piece of interpretive reading rather than writing, a sign that with *Omeros* Walcott was heeding his own call, issued in his 1976 poem *Sea Grapes*:

*One could abandon writing
for the slow-burning signals
of the great, to be, instead,
their ideal reader, ruminative,
voracious, making the love of masterpieces
superior to attempting
to repeat or outdo them,
and be the greatest reader in the world.*

- R.G.

Twentieth-Century American Art: Some Highlights

(October 28-30, 2015) by Gail Levin

American art emerged under the influence of European art and, led by a group of Realist painters, developed an identity of its own in the early years of the twentieth century. The 1930s saw the rise of the next big art movement in the United States, Abstract Expressionism, which put American art on the global map. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminist art began to develop and gain recognition in the US.

Over three sessions, Gail Levin, Distinguished Professor of Art History, American Studies and Women's Studies at Baruch College and Graduate Center of the City University of New York, presented highlights of these milestones of twentieth century American art. In her presentation, Prof. Levin, who has authored several seminal books and articles on this topic, included film clips and photographs that defined the artwork of the era.

The first session was on the work of Edward Hopper (1882-1967), a Realist painter, and his influence on cinema. Born in Nyack, New York, Hopper grew up at a time when cinema was also growing in the US. Hopper displayed a talent for drawing at an early age and enrolled at the Correspondence School of Illustrating in New York. After a year of study there, he transferred to the New York School of Art, where he initially studied illustration before moving on to painting.

Hopper worked as an illustrator for magazines like *Adventure* and *Scribner*, and also illustrated movie posters for Eclair Films. He was paid \$2 to

Gail Levin speaks during 'Twentieth Century American Art: Some Highlights'



watch the film and \$10 for each movie poster he made. He made posters for a number of films, including "The Master Criminal", "For Whom the Gods Destroy", and "Joan of Arc".

Hopper was fascinated by cinema, whose techniques and thematics influenced his work. Hopper did fifty sketches of the cinemas of New York. The theme of Hopper's last work, *Two Comedians* (1965), was cinema. The influence of cinema on Hopper's work is also evident from the fact all his paintings are framed horizontally and look like frozen scenes from a movie. It was in New York that Hopper became a true movie buff. He once said,

"When I don't feel like painting – I go to the movies. I go to the movies for a week or more. I go on a regular movie binge."

If Hopper was influenced by cinema, his works, in turn, inspired filmmakers. Acclaimed filmmaker Elia Kazan was a great admirer of Hopper and certain scenes in his 1954 film, “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn”, were inspired by his works. Other Hopper paintings that inspired films and filmmakers were *Night Windows* (“The Rear Window”); *Gas* (“Heartbeat”); *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (“Autumn”); *Morning in a City* (“Psycho”); *Nighthawks*; and, *New York Movie* (“Pennies from Heaven”). *The House by the Railroad* (1925) inspired a number of films, including “The Giant”, “Psycho”, and “Days of Heaven”. But it was Hopper’s *Nighthawks* (1942), widely acclaimed as his masterpiece, that fired the imagination of filmmakers, poets, and other artists, and its influence continues today.



Nighthawks (1942) by Edward Hopper
Image Source: www.edwardhopper.net

Hopper was a Realist painter, both by temperament and training, and he aimed to recreate a reality that he observed and perceived. His brand of realism, though, was peculiar insofar as he changed aspects of ‘reality’ in his paintings as he saw fit. For example, Jo

Nivison, his wife and collaborator in all his artistic endeavours, modelled for many of his paintings. She was short, but he turned her into a tall, leggy dancer in *The Girlie Show* (1941).

Hopper was dismissive of any art form that did not show reality and was dismayed by the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the 1930s. He maintained that reality would always reassert itself but his prediction was quite far off the mark, as Prof. Levin’s second session on “Abstract Expressionism: The Genesis of a New Style” revealed.

If the Great Depression of the 1930s was the basis for the development of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, World War II propelled its growth and recognition outside the country. This was the time when artists, art collectors and dealers from Europe, mostly Jews, fled their countries to escape Nazi persecution and arrived in the US. The complex and uncertain geo-political environment was just right for a new, spontaneous, and fluid aesthetics to spread rapidly in the country with the Jewish refugee community playing an active role.

Though the works of the Abstract Expressionists were stylistically different from each other, what bound them together was a break from existing formal conventions and techniques in painting. Their emphasis was on spontaneity, individuality, and dynamism expressed through abstract imagery.

Prof. Levin presented a diverse range of Abstract Expressionist work, providing the background of the artists and their work. Some of the works shared were:

- *Black Untitled* (1948) by William de Kooning, heavily influenced by Picasso's black and white 1937 masterpiece, *Guernica*.
- *Horse* (c.1944) by Jackson Pollock, who developed a unique drip painting technique in which he allowed the paint to drip directly onto the canvas.
- *Medals of Dishonour* by David Smith, a set of metal reliefs in bronze depicting the ills of war and mankind.
- *Menorah* by Ben Shahn. The Menorah here is not whole, but broken and its pieces have been joined to make it look whole. An abstract and visual image at the same time, the painting manages to depict the state of the Jewish community in the world at that time.
- *New York City* (1942) by Piet Mondrian captures the grid like layout of New York in lines of yellow, red, and blue.
- *The Sowers* (1942) by Thomas Hart Benton portrays the barbarity of fascism.
- *The Eyes of Oedipus* (1941) by Adolf Gottlieb. Here, Oedipus is man's subconscious, savage by nature and played out through war.
- *Igor* (1942) by Lee Krasner, one of the few women Abstract Expressionists. This was painted a time when she was undergoing a lot of turmoil due to her relationship with fellow artist, Igor Pantuhoff. This work has been considered by some critics and art historians as surrealist.

Two of the best known Abstract Expressionists committed suicide. The first was Arshile Gorky, who was heavily influenced by the works of Joan Miro and Kandinsky and had a promising career ahead of him, if illness had not driven him to take

his own life. The second was Mark Rothko, whose style changed from figurative in his early works to abstract in his later works. Some examples: *Street Scene* (1936) depicts a bearded man holding two children protectively; *Omen of the Eagle* (1940) uses the classical myth of Aeschylus to express the tragic events of the 1930s and 1940s; and, *Brown on Blue* (1953), his trademark exposition of rectangular blocks or frames of colour.



Black Untitled (1948) by William de Kooning
Image Source: www.metmuseum.org

The Abstract Expressionist phase of American art began petering out in the mid-1950s, giving way to other forms. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the next major art movement, Feminist Art, led by Judy Chicago would shake up the United States. **Judy Chicago and her Feminist Art** was the final topic of Prof. Levin's lecture series.

Born Judith Cohen in 1939, she was a gifted child who inherited a concern for social welfare from her father, Arthur Cohen. She was in the

forefront of social and political activism and always challenged the establishment and status quo. She adopted “Chicago” as her last name to betray the male-centred convention of naming.

Judy’s initial works exhibited abstract expressionism and minimalism, but later moved to what can be termed feminist art. *Bigamy* (1963) was one of the earliest such works and it represented the death of her father (when she was 13) and first husband (when she was 24 and after two years of marriage). These were followed by *Flight* (1963) and *Birth* (1963), all of which have anatomical references.

Chicago was not satisfied with just painting and kept adding other skills to enhance her artistic endeavors. She learnt auto body work, boat building, pyrotechnics, spray painting, porcelain painting, stained glass, and photography. These new skills helped Chicago conceptualise and set up huge art installations, including *Sunset Squares*, *Rainbow Picket*, *Dry Ice Environment*, and *Chicken Feather Room*.

In 1970, Judy Chicago started the first of its kind Women’s Art Program at Fresno State College. The program was developed with the objective of having students examine the meaning of being a woman, looking at women’s traditional crafts and the history of women artists in this context. During her stint at the College, Chicago conceived an installation project, *Womenhouse* (1971), in collaboration with Miriam Schapiro, a fellow painter and feminist artist. Chicago’s students also contributed to the project, which was an exploration of women’s entrapment in domesticity.

Gail Levin ended her lecture series by showcasing Judy Chicago’s monumental masterpiece, *The Dinner Party*. A collaborative art project that took over three years to complete and involved the efforts of over 400 volunteers; it was first exhibited in 1979. *The Dinner Party* was imagined around 39 great women placed in a triangular seating arrangement with thirteen women on each side. A lot of research went into the choosing these historical women and personalising their seating arrangements and dinner plates. Some of the women invited included Ishtar, Kali, Hatshepsut, and Virginia Woolf. On the floor and in the space created by tables were the names of 999 women who have contributed towards the historical betterment of women in some way.



The Dinner Party (1974 - 79) by Judy Chicago
Image Source: www.judychicago.com

Judy did most of the fundraising for the project herself and had the support of other feminists such as Anais Nin, Gloria Steinem, Alice Neel, and Ann Rockefeller Roberts. Though *The Dinner Party* opened to great attendance records and curiosity by the public in 1979, it was not exhibited after 1982 in the United States, until it found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2003. - S.G.

ISLAMIC AESTHETICS

Forthcoming Programmes:

Deccan Islamic Architecture: 400 years of patronage and building in Peninsula India
(January 5 - 7, 2016 from 6:15 - 8:30 pm) *by George Michell and Helen Philon*



Underpinned by the growing body of scholarship on the Islamic architecture in the Deccan, this series of lectures will describe and analyse the principal forts, palaces, mosques and tombs of Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. These diverse monuments span the period from the invasion of the Delhi sultans at the beginning of the 14th century, through the rise and fall of the Bahmanis of Gulbarga and Bidar, and the successor states of Ahmadnagar, Bijapur and Golconda, up until the conquest of the region by the Mughals during the 17th century. The lectures will be profusely illustrated with specially commissioned new photographs by Antonio Martinelli.

5 Jan The Delhi Sultans of Daulatabad and Early Bahmanis of Gulbarga (14th Century): *by Helen Philon*

The Later Bahmanis of Bidar (15th Century): *by Helen Philon*

6 Jan The Nizam Shahis of Ahmadnagar and the Baridis of Bidar (16th Century): *by George Michell*

The Adil Shahis of Bijapur (16th-17th Centuries): *by George Michell*

7 Jan The Qutb Shahis of Golconda Hyderabad (16th-17th Centuries): *by George Michell*

The Mughals in Daulatabad and Aurangabad (17th-18th Centuries): *by George Michell*

Staging Multiculturalism? Norman Sicily and the Arts of the Medieval Mediterranean

(January 12-14, 2016, from 6:15 - 8.30 pm) by *Finbarr Barry Flood*

In the last decades of the eleventh century, the island of Sicily was conquered by a group of Norman knights led by Roger I (d. 1101). Descendants of the Vikings, the Normans hailed from northern France and had first come to southern Italy as Christian mercenaries in the employ of Muslim dynasties such as the Kalbids (r. 948-1053), whom they eventually overthrew to take power in their own right. The geographic position of Sicily meant that it was ideally placed to engage with the cultural traditions of the entire Mediterranean. Under Roger II (d. 1154) Sicily became the center of a Christian kingdom famed for its cultural and political engagements with Byzantium, the Latin west and the Islamic world.

The court culture that developed under Roger's rule has long been famed for its carefully calibrated eclecticism, typified by the minting of coins bearing Arabic and Latin inscriptions, the employment of Muslim astrologers, geographers and physicians, the use of Islamicate titles, and the construction of spectacular monuments that combined Byzantine and Islamic elements.

These three seminars are intended as an introduction to arts of this remarkable Christian kingdom in their broader Mediterranean context. The material raises significant questions about the value of art and architecture to elite self-representation, the agency of pre-modern elites, and the challenges of conceptualizing or representing pre-modern multi-, trans- or

polycultural artistic traditions in the present.



12 Jan Art and Politics in the Mediterranean, 11th and 12th centuries

13 Jan The Norman Court, the Rogerian Era and the Fatimids of Egypt

14 Jan The Capella Palatina in a Transregional Context

Criticism & Theory

The Art, Criticism, and Theory programme invited its students to participate in detailed conversations on the nature of practices and themes that occupy the world of art and visual culture. From sessions that discussed in detail the nature and shape of institutions that make-up the ecosystem of the art world today, to the idea of what 'curating' means as an intellectual engagement with art as well as politics - there were many aspects of the world of art that students began to discuss within a historical

context. These sessions expressed the different ways in which artistic production is guided, encouraged, nurtured, maneuvered as well as productively argued through.

Specific sessions elaborated the different forms of artistic expression - the moving image, the animated graphic novel, as well as epic poetry. The ways in which readings are developed within each of these traditions of image-making; the role that these forms play in contributing to a wider dialogue and debate in



Image Courtesy: Sahej Rahal

cultural politics, as well as history-writing projects and popular imagination were debated in detail. Various arguments on the nature and role of art in the modern and contemporary world were taken up in sessions through readings of texts as well as visiting works. Gender, censorship, and the chaotic nature of globalisation all came under the scanner as different sessions on theory and knowledge-building traditions were taken up. The quarter closed with a detailed session on the history and idea of Performance Art in India, questioning and understanding the turns in artistic traditions and practices as we moved through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century.

The students are currently in the process of shaping an editorial or curatorial statement on a subject of their choice - as part of a workshop that aims to help participants condense and crystallise some of the learnings from the course.
- K.M.

Foundations I: Postcolonial Theory

(October 6, 7, 13, 14, 19, 23 & November 2, 5 2015) *by Rohit Goel*

Please refer to our Slant/Stance section on page #35

Just What I Always Wanted! Eros and Nomos in the Mimetic Archive

(December 15, 2015) *by William Mazzarella*

William Mazzarella, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, returned to Jnanapravaha in December to present arguments from his current book manuscript,

which rethinks the problems of identification and desire through the categories of eros (love, resonance), nomos (law, order), and 'mimetic archive' (a replacement for 'culture'). In a talk titled, 'Just What I Always Wanted!', Prof. Mazzarella troubled the traditional debate about advertising and marketing as either imposing false desires on consumer-citizens or catering to their already-existing desires.



Odysseus and the Sirens (1909) by Herbert James Draper
Image Source: www.wikipedia.org

Prof. Mazzarella cogently argued that this debate presents a false choice; it shares in the assumption that citizens have true or authentic desires that are either manipulated or adequately addressed by advertisers and marketers. He challenged the assumption of authentic desire, suggesting instead that a subject's desire is constituted in relation to the object of her desire in social life. Put differently, our desires and identifications do not exist prior to our encounters with the world; it is through these everyday encounters that we shape our identifications and

desires, that we live. As such, Prof. Mazzarella argued, desire is not pre-given or static; it has an eventful status.

The traditional debate about advertising stems from the classical liberal desire for a sovereign, free, individual subject. Manipulating advertisers are seen to compromise our freedom while sensitive marketers recognize and thus enhance our individual wants and needs. Prof. Mazzarella questioned our obsession with individual freedom, which, paradoxically, works to undermine the very subjective integrity that we seem to desire. For if our desires are perfectly transparent to ourselves before we encounter the world rather than shaped through our encounters, we would experience the world like animals or automata rather than as social beings.

Indeed, Prof. Mazzarella suggested through a brilliant interpretation of Homer's Sirens, our anxiety heightens at the very moment that we are addressed perfectly: our sociality disintegrates at the moment that we no longer need to negotiate our relations to the world of objects and others, at the very moment that our desire is fulfilled. Maintaining a gap between desire and its objects is crucial to our subjective integrity. The task for politics and ethics is how to live creatively rather than oppressively in the gap between ourselves and others. - R.G.

The Politics of Charisma in the Contemporary World

(December 16, 2015) *William Mazzarella and Rohit Goel in Conversation*

In October 1937— a period during which the

Indian National Congress had already acquired a stronghold in the provinces of the colonial state, four years after the establishment of the Third Reich in Munich and ten years prior to the formation of the postcolonial Indian nation-state— 'Chanakya' published a letter addressed to Jawaharlal Nehru titled '*The Rashtrapati*'. Writing under a pseudonym, Nehru offers a strong, and therefore anxious, critique of those character traits 'innate' to him that threaten the suppression of mass agency under yet another nefarious, autocratic regime. Significantly, a suite of binaries— between the iron fist of despotism and the dynamics of democracy, between *charismatic* modes of artifice on one hand and sincerity of political intention as well as the autonomy of 'the people' on the other— reverberates throughout this text.

Thus, as Professors William Mazzarella and Rohit Goel stated at the outset of their conversation, discourses on the energetics of mass democracy and its susceptibility to perversion evince a complex history. By reflecting on the shift in the structural contexts within which charismatic politics and its relation to democratic political cycles has been perceived since the early twentieth century, Mazzarella and Goel sought to vex any attempt at a canonical definition of the term 'charisma'.

As per social theorist Max Weber's understanding of legitimate political authority, charismatic leadership— whether it positioned itself at the forefront of socio-political reform, or, as is evident in Nehru's polemic, catalyzed democracy's fall from grace— was necessarily

Rohit Goel and William Mazzarella in conversation during 'The Politics of Charisma in the Contemporary World'



embodied by an *individual* who determined its trajectory and consequences. Unlike traditional and legal modes of polity that were impersonal and perpetuated historical systems of law and power, charismatic politics acted on and transformed those systems from without, and were thus *exceptional* to them.

In consideration of the fact that mid-late twentieth century political history legitimated Nehru's anxieties, does there exist a mode of conceptualizing charismatic politics within a

post-Cold War, neo-liberal milieu that witnessed the 'end of History' and, concomitantly, of the 'evil' perpetrated by charismatic personae such as Mussolini, Hitler Stalin and Pol Pot? As is evident in the means by which, inter alia, the electoral campaigns of Prime Minister Modi in India and Presidential candidate Trump in the United States have been/are being conducted, the divorce between charisma and populist politics remains to be effected. However, as the speakers argued, though charismatic politics

continues to be conceived as transformative, it now fashions itself solely as a resuscitator of a dying democratic system, a restorer of robust, efficient polity. As such, charismatic leadership within a contemporary political context becomes socialized— if not routinized— non-exceptional and, above all, *non-pathological*. By emphasizing its accountability to the law and the people, it relinquishes any claim to sovereignty.

If contemporary charismatic politics does indeed eschew connotations of sovereignty, much— if not all— the responsibility for its consequences rests on the ‘crowd’ that institutes it. Moreover, a productive conception of the charismatic leader is one that constructs him as an actualization, and therefore reification, of elements latent in an archive of collective desire such that this constructive mechanism is effaced by a valorization of an individual as exceptional and by a retroactive theorization of his ascent to power as inevitable. Thus, thirty-percent of the constituency that favors Republican Presidential candidates in the United States justifies Trump’s ‘candor’ as an element that was ‘always wanted’ in the current political climate of the nation. Further, an understanding of the relation between the individual and the collective outlined above demonstrates that the repeated invocation of Modi’s ‘exceptional’ *modus operandi* is an anxious attempt to transfer accountability by naming a sovereign.

A critique of charismatic politics that imputes agency to ‘the people’ merits consideration of the contexts in which charisma is conferred on them. As the speakers averred, the ‘crowd’ is a

schizophrenic hermeneutic: it evokes the image of the chaotic mob channeling a subliminal substance that renders it irrational, insidious and eruptive as well as that of a multitude that exemplifies democracy as immanent unto itself. Needless to say, a post-Cold War political context, in which the charismatic leader is socialized, renders instances of mass protests— such as those that occurred in Egypt and Tunisia— as motivated by the enlightened desire to sign the social contract. It is in so far as collective struggle can be domesticated that it is charismatic.

In all, the structure of contemporary charismatic politics and the context within which it prevails is constitutively paradoxical and prismatic; it resists any assignation with dichotomous characterizations of individual and collective agency and acquiescence. Perhaps this is the only ‘nugget of truth’ that may be gathered— albeit prematurely— from what promises to be only the beginning of a conversation on this complex subject. - *S.H.*

Working Enigma: Making Sense of Antonioni’s Blow-Up

(December 19, 2015) *by Nikolas Kompridis*

Dappled light on a green canvas. Silence. In the distance, human intimacy. Snap. The moment: fugitive, contingent, ephemeral, taken.

Superficially, seminal filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni’s definitive film ‘Blow-Up’ belongs to the ‘whodunit’ genre. Moreover, it provides a

portentous rendition of creative energy in 1960s London— self-possessed, rambunctious, suspicious of the call to duty and responsibility. However, as Professor Nikolas Kompridis emphasized, ‘Blow-Up’ is not simply an enigmatic film; it delivers a language for living with enigma, for working enigma without taking it, transcending it, for making ‘sense’ of a blow-up.

Thomas: the quintessential ‘painter’ of modern life, intoxicated by the workings of his medium, renders conscious each passing moment of modernity in his dark room, reveals with candor the voracity and penchant for voyeurism that undergird his craft. Takes pictures like he takes women; ‘its’ all beautiful, what’s to know? (But do ennui and distaste not suggest desire?)



Dappled light on a green canvas. Silence. In the distance, human intimacy. (A non-descript parkland. Half-shot: a tennis court, desolate. An embrace on a hillock, the light beautiful, taken.) The ‘snap’ blown-up. (One of the developed

works: a supine anthropomorphic form, all scintillation and shadow.) Death unseen, someone never known. Not beauty illuminated, but hyper-aestheticized, realized, unreal, fantastic. Things fall apart. (The ‘crime scene’ mapped, blow-up by blow-up. In the dead of night the embracing male located. Did he witness the murder? Did we not see what he did ‘capture’? Did we? Does it matter?)

Fragments scuttle, scurry, collide, coalesce in the potential space snapped out of reality. Contained. The stilling of the to and fro. Not the quicksilver of the mirror but the screened unveiling of fissured vistas. New wholes emerge, address, seek containment. The object constructs in its own image. A gift.

(Come sunrise. Return to the scene, an assignation with absence. Weaving together cityscapes of charcoal and chlorophyll a troupe of masquing ‘insurgents’. Encounter. To the tennis court, desolation dispelled. The ball spewed forth, airborne. The camera dropped, obscure. The eye receives. An arc of circular absence, over the court, across the field, dropped. He reaches out, handles, responds, returns.)

Aesthetic language transformed. From an art of doing to art in being, art as play. The only resolution to be had: open-mouthed. The corpse not perceivable, unintelligible. The absence worked through enigmatic play. New wholes received, reciprocated, given. Silence completes the circle.

The final blow-up, the blow-up par excellence: the painter circled, taken. “...all spirits, and are melted into air.” - - *S.H.*

Two Philosophers on Norms

(December 19, 2015) *Akeel Bilgrami and Nikolas Kompridis in Conversation*

Norms, as conceived within the context of Enlightenment thought, mediate and craft the educated human subject's relationship with his life-conditions; indeed, they determine those very conditions. As Professor Kompridis stated, to think about normativity through the lens of modern Western philosophy, is to understand it as a function of rationality. Norms offer a restrained, non-arbitrary, and over time, an involuntary mechanism for sanctioning human action. Moreover, the credo that reverberates throughout the discourse on norms within the ambit of the afore-mentioned philosophical tradition may be summarized as follows: Act such that the justification for that action can be crystallized into a universal law'.

However, as Professor Bilgrami pointed out, such 'universality' sought to realize itself through the condition of colonization. For instance, although British colonialists did not consider their Indian subjects 'uneducable', they did conceive of the latter as an infantile civilization that necessitated 'supervision' by a mature, modern society till such time that the natives were fortified with the cognitive means to 'master' themselves and thus become 'full' citizens. As such the representation of modern European norms as universal provided one of the bases of a historicist worldview. Before norms could become hegemonic within the colonial context, it was imperative that they be coercive. Empire, as an enterprise, was justified as a moral obligation.

On the other hand, Professor Kompridis averred, a number of social and cultural norms, often termed 'etiquette' are historically and geographically specific; their violation does not constitute a moral threat to the concerned social milieu.

As such, it may be gathered from the conversation of the two philosophers that norms make the human subject answerable to them or, put differently, they confer on the human being the role of an addressee. However, it is precisely as addressees that humans possess the potential to realize freedom— the freedom that situates

Akeel Bilgrami converses during 'Two Philosophers on Norms'



itself at the horizon of a challenging circumstance, challenging in that it compels the subject to re-consider and question the merits of a worldview hitherto accepted as normal. Human agency thus expresses itself as the ability to receive a situation as enigmatic, to engage it on its own uncompromised terms rather than as the anxious, frenetic attempt to subsume it within acquired frameworks of thought in an effort to return to the fire-side warmth of familiarity, to plod through 'life as we know it'.

The savored reception and containment of an enigmatic situation gradually, often fragmentarily, engenders a reflective response that engages it profoundly— a response at once normative and transformative. The degree to which an individual allows for receptivity is determined both by his specific emotional and cognitive constitution as well as the gravity of the ontological or intellectual crisis to be engaged. Herein, Professor Kompridis contended, lies the possibility for the conception of norms as non-universal. Moreover, in such situations, the impetus for an 'original' response is a futile one, precisely because the attributes of 'originality', when considered in relation to a wide sphere of action, can only be posited retroactively.

In all, the genesis of normative response— as delineated in the preceding two passages— lies in a willingness to allow for a productive unraveling of the self rather than in the perceived compunction to 'master' enigma. As Professor Kompridis argued, norms offer a means of living creatively as opposed to merely prescribing who we ought to be, who we ought to become. - *S.H.*

ANNOUNCEMENT

Foundations II: Structuralism/Poststructuralism

(March 2, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 21, 25, & 28, 2016, from 6.30 - 8.30 pm) *with Rohit Goel*



Jnanapravaha's new Foundations programme resumes with a ten session seminar series on structuralism and poststructuralism. The first half of the course begins with the structural linguistics of Saussure and Jakobson, moves to Barthes's semiotics, and finishes with the structural anthropology of Levi-Strauss, Sahlins, and the early Foucault. Situating the shift to poststructuralism in the historical context of the 1960's and 1970's, the second half of the course begins with the later Foucault of *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*, moves to Derrida's notion of *différance* and Deleuze's conception of desire, and finishes by putting Marx into conversation with the later Lacan. Students will gain a foundational understanding of the epistemological contours and stakes of structuralism and poststructuralism.

Community Engagement

Vikalp@Jnanapravaha

During the last quarter, we had three documentary film screenings as part of the initiative Vikalp@Jnanapravaha. At each instance, the respective film maker was present to introduce their film and engage the audience in a discussion after.

Prabhat Pheri (Journey With Prabhat)

(October 15, 2015) *by Jessica Sadanha & Samarth Dixit | Documentary | 89 minutes*

The film was an attempt to explore the spirit of a space - the campus of the erstwhile Prabhat Film Company that is today the premises of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) and the National Film Archive in Pune.



Cities of Sleep

(November 26, 2015) *by Shaunak Sen | Documentary | 75 min*

'Cities of Sleep' took us into a heady world of insurgent sleeper's communities as well as the infamous 'sleep mafia' in Delhi where just securing a safe sleeping spot often becomes a question of life and death for a large number of people.

Riders of the Mist

(December 11, 2015) *by Roopa Barua | Documentary | 65 min*

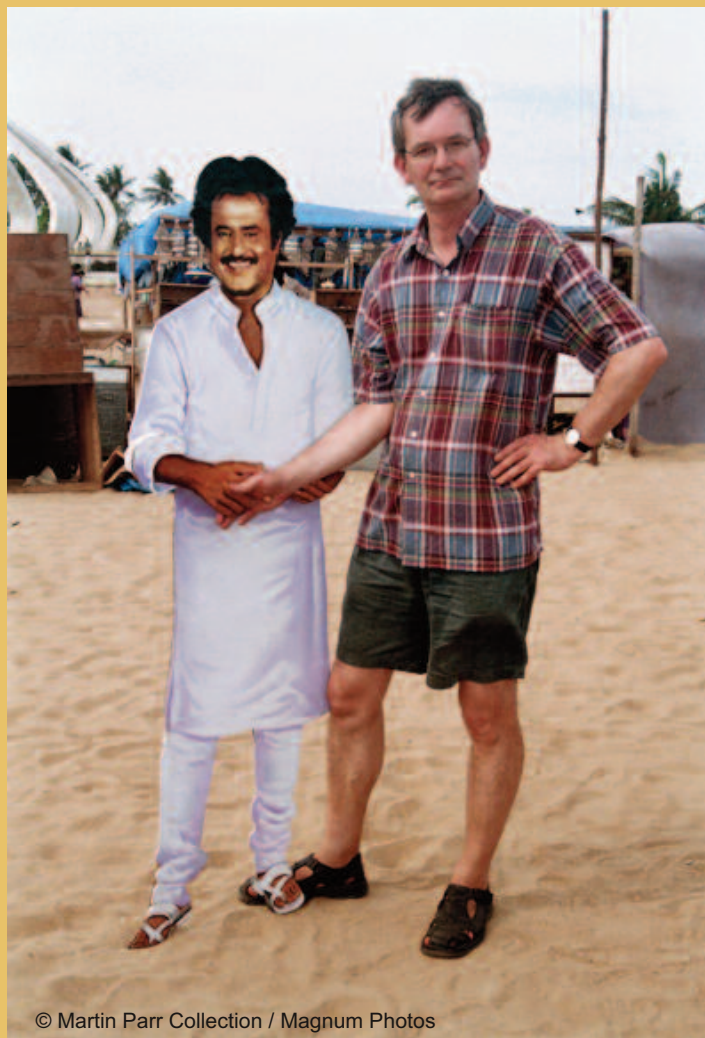
'Riders of the Mist' is about a century-old bareback pony racing tradition in the state of Assam. This documentary is a portrayal of the races as they unfold, the jockeys and their lives and these ponies that become part of the tradition every year.

Forthcoming Programmes

The history of the photobook, a personal crusade

(January 8, 2016 at 6.30 pm) by *Martin Parr*
In collaboration with BIND

While the history of photography is a well-established canon, much less critical attention



© Martin Parr Collection / Magnum Photos

has been directed at the phenomenon of the photobook, which for many photographers is perhaps the most significant vehicle for the display of their work and the communication of their vision to a mass audience. Martin Parr will talk about the various books on photobooks he has produced, and explains why this somewhat overlooked aspect of photography culture has come into its own in the last decade or so. Parr's presentation will be followed by a conversation with Philippe Calia, photographer and co-founder of the BIND Collective.

The Prophet And The Poet

(January 10, 2016 at 6.00 pm) with *Akeel Bilgrami and Anmol Vellani*

In collaboration with Columbia Global Centers – South Asia



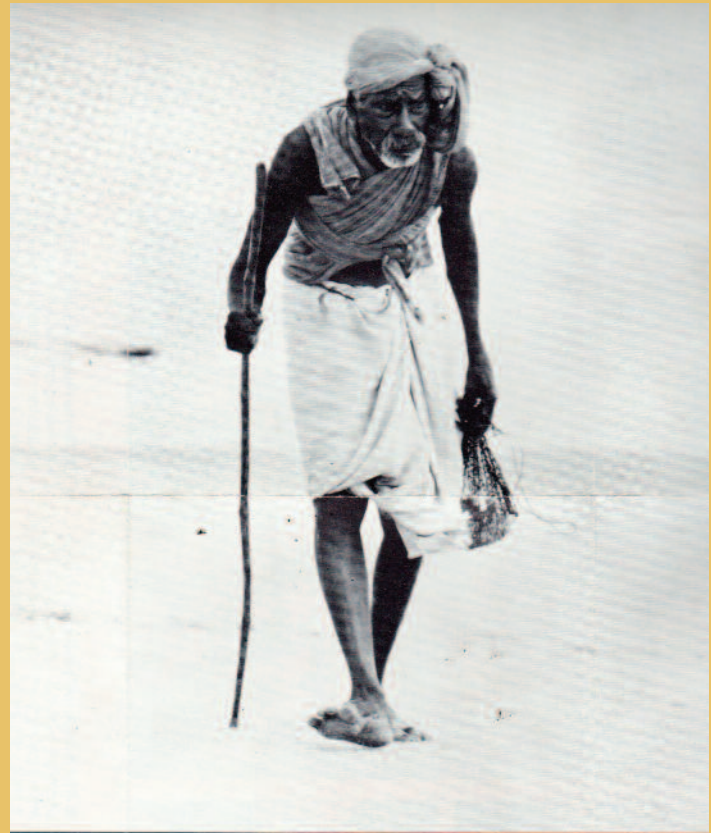
The letters that Gandhi and Tagore wrote to each other constitute what is possibly the most intellectually and politically exciting and moving correspondence ever to be published anywhere. Two giants of Indian history and culture write to each other over a few decades about the most

fundamental issues, not only of their time but of universal concern. Each writes with the utmost affection and respect for the other. They sometimes agree. But they often disagree and when they do, there is a stark clash of visions and ideals expressed with respect but with a searing force of conviction and a rhetoric to match. The real stuff of drama expressing great depths of feeling and thought, the letters have recently been captured in a remarkable play by Vijay Padaki. There will be a public reading of the play directed by one of India's foremost theatrical figures, Anmol Vellani. Anmol Vellani will also play one of the two roles, joined by Akeel Bilgrami who has written extensively on Gandhi in recent years. Rajmohan Gandhi will lead a discussion of the correspondence with the audience after the reading.

Louis Malle's "Jana Gana Mana" in Three Episodes from Phantom India (1968-1969)

(January 11, 2016 at 6.30 pm) by *Darius Cooper*

This is an investigation of the first three episodes of Louis Malle's *Phantom India* and how he had to surrender and empty his western European sensibility completely as a film-maker and reinvent and rediscover new ways of documenting the many bewildering avatars of an eastern country that literally and metaphorically presented itself to him as a phantom. The talk focuses on the new methods and ways in which Malle presents, as authentically as he can, the reality that was India without disturbing it and without shaping it in any clever way from his position as an auteur behind the camera.



Louis Malle's
**PHANTOM
INDIA**
INDIAN ODYSSEY

Polyphonic Modernisms and the Art of V. S. Gaitonde

(February 4, 2016 at 6.30 pm) by *Sandhini Poddar*

When the twentieth century is viewed through the psycho-geography of a series of shifting and overlapping tectonic plates—through modernism, decades of decolonization and nationalism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, and the intercultural dialogues between Asian, European, and American artists, intellectuals, and cultural agents—what emerges is the story of several simultaneously evolving histories, or what may be

termed as “polyphonic modernisms.” This lecture will explore the life and times of celebrated Indian modernist painter Vasudeo S. Gaitonde from the 1940s until the artist’s death in 2001. Gaitonde’s oeuvre was equally informed by the traditions of Indian miniature painting and East Asian calligraphy, as well as Western movements such as Non-Objective Painting, Abstract Expressionism, and *Taschisme*. Alongside these influences, various Indian philosophers and Zen Buddhism had a profound impact on his worldview.



Installation view: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2014. Photo: David M. Heald

Slant/Stance

Foundations I: Postcolonial Theory

(October 6, 7, 13, 14, 19, 23 & November 2, 5 2015) *by Rohit Goel*

An Anglo-American academic discipline that emerged during the 1980s, postcolonial theory is premised on the conviction that neither the methodology of structural Marxism nor of poststructuralism can independently account for the meanings and consequences of the colonial encounter. As such, postcolonialism attempts to establish a dialectic between these epistemic vectors in its investigation of subaltern agency and cultural alterity during the colonial moment as well as in its critique of nationalism and the economic and sociological determinism characteristic of post-Enlightenment European intellectual history.

Robert Young avers, “postcolonialism offers a politics rather than a coherent methodology. Indeed...strictly speaking there is no such thing as postcolonial theory...— rather there are shared political perceptions and agendas which employ an eclectic range of theories in their service.”¹ However, as Professor Leela Gandhi acknowledges, “it is on account of its commitment to this project of theoretical and political integration that postcolonialism deserves academic attention.”²

This paper, based on the seminar ‘Foundations I: Postcolonial Theory’ conducted

by Professor Rohit Goel, provides a brief account of how the afore mentioned epistemological frameworks have been deployed in a comprehensive critique of liberal and materialist colonial historiography undertaken by intellectuals at the forefront of the Postcolonial Studies collective. Specifically, the texts considered here theorize the trajectories of modernity, nationalism, and subaltern politics in colonial India.

Historicism and the Specter of Alterity

Until the 1970s, the representation of nationalism and colonialism in modern Indian history was governed by two major and mutually exclusive approaches. At one extreme, Cambridge historians presented a materialist account of the Indian bourgeoisie’s struggle for self-rule. It was the penetration of formal governmental and institutional processes into the domain of local class or caste-based power structures, they argued, that prompted indigenous elites to compete for the “limited opportunities for self-rule provided by the British.”³ Thus, nationalism was not inspired by an idealistic call for freedom; rather, it was “the rivalry between Indian and Indian” for political privilege³. On the other hand, Indian Marxist historians portrayed nationalism as a robust

antidote to the 'regressive' force of the colonial state. As an antithesis to colonialism, they maintained, the national movement inaugurated by educated natives enabled Indians to transcend differences of class and caste in their aspiration to swaraj.

The Cambridge school's understanding of indigenous politics as purely materialist would never resonate with a large section of Indian intellectuals for whom a desire for independence had been a concrete experience. Further, as research continued in the 1970s, information on the mobilization of peasants and laborers in the course of national movements spearheaded by the Indian National Congress undermined the portrayal of elitist politics as entirely exclusionary. However, evidence that nationalist leaders would suppress subaltern agency that threatened to overshoot the limits of elitist political agendas rendered the valorization of nationalism as an egalitarian 'moral war' against British oppression suspect. Moreover, East Pakistan's struggle for independence in 1971, the outbreak of the rural Naxalite movement that found support among educated urban youth who were sympathetic to Maoist ideology, and the suspension of constitutional rights during the state Emergency of 1975 were factors that engendered disillusionment with fervent nationalist sentiment and revealed a pervasive rift between the interests of the governing bourgeoisie and the subaltern classes. Thus, a younger generation of Indian intellectuals who came of age during this period distanced themselves from the prevalent modes of nationalist historiography in a

committed effort to engage the crises of the postcolonial state.

In 1982 historian Ranajit Guha inaugurated an editorial collective titled Subaltern Studies to critique the two contending strains of colonial historiography. Both models, Guha asserted in an introductory statement to the series, emphasized the role of elites, whether British or Indian, in the national movement. By contrast, the new initiative aimed to produce historical analyses that would acknowledge the contribution of subaltern classes to the anti-colonial struggle. The counter-elitist textual politics favored by this collective shared several facets with the 'history from below' approach to English historiography developed by Marxist scholars such as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm and Keith Thomas. As postcolonial critic Dipesh Chakrabarty explains, "both owed a certain intellectual debt to the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci in trying to move away from deterministic, Stalinist readings of Marx. The word 'subaltern' itself and, of course, the...concept of 'hegemony' so critical to the theoretical project of subaltern studies go back to the writings of Gramsci."⁴ Further, in the ethos of the 'history from below' school, Guha stated in a later volume of the collective, "we are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography . . . for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project."⁵

However, it is the critical breaks from Marxist epistemology that undergird the significance of the Subaltern Studies collective. First, Guha

sought to theorize subaltern insurgency as 'political' and to differentiate elitist indigenous politics from that of the subaltern classes, whom he defined as "'the demographic difference between the total Indian population' and the dominant indigenous and foreign elite."⁵ Marxist historiographers, including Hobsbawm, characterized peasant revolts organized along the axes of religion, kinship, and ethnicity as symptomatic of a 'residual' or 'pre-political/traditional' consciousness that signified an incomplete transition to the constitutional and legalistic political systems synonymous with modernity and capitalism – systems internalized by indigenous elites. By insisting that the specific modes of Indian subaltern agency were resistant to colonial capitalism and modernity rather than atavistic, Guha suggested that the colonial situation stretched the imagined boundaries of European political discourse. Further, as Chakrabarty notes, Guha's designation of subaltern insurgency as 'political' separates and pluralizes the histories of capital and power structures or politics. Contrary to Marxist understanding, for Guha, the emergence of parliamentary institutions need not logically follow the consolidation of capitalism in a particular society. Further, modernity is not contingent on the consistent operation of such institutions across socio-economic divides. "The global history of capitalism does not have to reproduce everywhere the same history of power"; capitalist relations of exchange, Guha would argue, do not unequivocally determine political modality⁶.

Regarding the narrative of nationalism, Guha

argued against the depiction of a 'pan-Indian' nationalist movement initiated by native elites. Unlike their European counterparts, the British colonialists and Indian bourgeoisie were unable to construct a hegemonic ideology – an ideology that would enable the bourgeoisie to secure the internalization of their interests by subaltern classes without recourse to coercion. As noted above, the separation between elite and subaltern political domains indicated that 'secular' legal and disciplinary frameworks did not envelop the subaltern; practices of "political modernity" were thus interjected by autocratic, often physical, modes of domination and subordination, that is, by methods that effected dominance without hegemony. Indian culture in the colonial period "defied understanding 'either as a replication of the liberal-bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century Britain or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture.'"⁷ The prevalence of dominance without hegemony, Guha argued, "was the index of an important historical truth, that is, the failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation."⁸ Thus, subaltern historiography averred, the origins of the cleft between bourgeois and subaltern interests that plagued the postcolonial state were located in the colonial moment. (Although the Cambridge school historians maintain that native elites were locked in a power struggle that, by nature, did not elicit subaltern participation, their silence on matters of subaltern agency precluded a comparative analysis of group interests.) The task of the colonial historiographer, now, was to investigate the practices through which an elitist

nationalism that claimed to represent a 'unitary' nation emerged.

Moreover, an effort to make the subaltern a subject of history entailed a re-evaluation of the relationship between elitist politics and textual evidence. Given that subaltern social groups do not contribute to the generation of official historical archives, scholars of the 'history from below' school turned to the disciplines of anthropology and linguistics in order to understand subaltern voice and experience. While Guha also took recourse to the social sciences for this purpose, Chakrabarty contends that Guha's theorization of the category 'consciousness' was different from that of his English counterparts. Rather than striving to recuperate individual subaltern psychology, Guha locates consciousness in the relationships between elites and subalterns and between subalterns themselves as made manifest in the modes of insurgent political practices recorded in colonial archives. Chakrabarty writes, "Guha makes no claim that the 'insurgent consciousness' he discusses...existed inside the heads of peasants. He does not equate consciousness with 'the subject's view of himself'"⁹. Further, Guha emphasized the imperative to develop a strategy for reading historical documents that would not only identify the workings of elitist ideology but also provide the basis for re-constructing 'elementary aspects' of subaltern practices (and therefore consciousness) from the diverse and dispersed representations of these refractory figures afforded by official texts. "Without such a

scanning device, Guha argued, historians tended to reproduce the same logic of representation as that used by the elite classes in dominating the subaltern."⁹

Thus, in insisting on a "relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital", in critiquing nationalist ideology and interrogating "the relationship between power and knowledge (hence of history as a form of knowledge)", the Subaltern Studies project, Chakrabarty argues, aligns itself with poststructuralist concerns that characterize the output of the broader Postcolonial Studies collective⁵. By reorienting the fulcrum of historical discourse, Subaltern Studies excavates the mechanisms by which anti-colonial sentiment was formed. In its presentation of the elites as neither unconcerned with mass mobilization nor entirely egalitarian in their dealings with the subalterns, this practice claims a critical middle ground between the conflicting strands of colonial historiography that precede it.

Circling back to Guha's theorization of subaltern agency as 'political', two crucial aspects of Western – liberal and leftist – political thought bear elaboration. First, the reverence of communal and religious strictures by subaltern classes elicited the conclusion that colonial Indian society was as yet undergoing a transition to capitalism proper – a transition whose completion would be announced by the consolidation of secular, liberal political institutions across the state. In other words, the global history of capital was theorized as incomplete, and it was averred that modernity

had not yet arrived on colonial shores. Second, this conclusion was premised on the understanding that capitalism had spread from Europe to colonial societies and it was only a matter of time before its trajectory in the latter would be analogous to that revealed by European history. Together, Chakrabarty argues, these assertions evince a specifically European (and therefore pervasive) philosophy of history known as historicism.

Although the term historicism enjoys a complex and diverse intellectual history, Chakrabarty delineates its salient characteristics as follows: a) historicism implies that in order to assess the nature and impact of any social phenomenon one must perceive it as a universal and potentially unified structure and as an historically developing entity; b) historicism allows for complexities, particularities and discontinuities in the developmental process or, put differently, the teleological nature of historical events is not immediately apparent but is constructed retroactively; and, c) historicism assumes that developments occur in different geographies over uneven periods of time. The time that elapses in the course of development is 'secular, homogenous and empty'. No longer to be orchestrated by the cosmic consciousness that preserved the sovereign, 'pre-modern' state, the looming expanse of time must now be filled by human agency. Moreover, historical time, Enlightenment European political thought declares, provides a level playing field to agents across geographies. Development is a function of human capacity.

Chakrabarty's comprehensive engagement with historicist epistemology in his celebrated opus *Provincializing Europe* was prompted by his intellectual investment in the Subaltern Studies collective, which provides, as seen above, an "incipient critique" of historicism. Specifically, Chakrabarty argues, it is those phenomena that originate in the history of the West – Enlightenment, industrialization, and capitalism – that are imbued with universal import. Europe, therefore, is rendered as the seedbed of modern world history. Moreover, the structural characteristics of any phenomenon are never pre-determined but defined performatively, on the basis of the trajectory of historical events in the West. Therefore, in the march to development, the West would always already have traversed a longer stretch of 'empty' time, thus consigning non-Western societies, as Chakrabarty states, to the 'waiting room of history.'

For Chakrabarty, "a critique of historicism... goes to the heart of the question of political modernity in non-Western societies. If 'political modernity' was to be a bounded and definable phenomenon, it was not unreasonable to use its definition as a measuring rod for social progress."¹⁰ Chakrabarty acknowledges that the historicist explanation of the origins of capitalism is inescapable – the participation of the colonial Indian state in the global history of capital could not be disputed. However, it is the ascription of a superlative value to a specific political modality and the conflation of the latter's prevalence with that of 'modernity' and 'capitalism proper' that Chakrabarty, like Guha, contests.

In response to a historicist understanding of modernity, Chakrabarty postulates the existence of ‘two histories of capital’ in colonial Indian society. Certain structures of a socio-economic system emerge or exist in history prior to the establishment of capitalist relations of exchange, contribute to the latter’s reproduction, and, in turn, are perpetuated by capitalism. Chakrabarty, referring to Marx, states that these structures are “capital’s antecedent ‘posited by itself’”¹¹. In other words, it is only with a sufficient understanding of capital’s recurring logic that certain elements can be retrospectively perceived as logical preconditions of capitalism. Free labor, for instance, is “both a precondition of capitalist production and its ‘invariable result’”¹¹. Since these ‘preconditions’ are indispensable to the universal proliferation of capital, they are a common feature of all societies in which capitalism has taken hold. Thus, they constitute ‘History 1’.

However, “capital (also) has to encounter in the reproduction of its life process (socio-political) relationships that present it with double possibilities. These relations could be central to capital’s self-reproduction, and yet it is also possible for them to be oriented to structures that do not contribute to such reproduction.”¹² The elements that comprise ‘History 2’ do not dwell within an economy that runs parallel to that of capitalist production; rather they are constitutive of the latter and yet “interrupt and punctuate the run of capital’s own logic.”¹² For instance, modes of political mobilization that draw upon the religious or communal rather than libertarian

identities of wage laborers or the practice of devoting a certain amount of labor time on Diwali day to the performance of Laxmi puja in the factory are cited in this context. By recourse to Heidegger’s understanding of human vitality, Chakrabarty extends the ambit of History 2 such that it encompasses all cultural learning, desires, and idiosyncrasies of character that resist capital’s absolute ‘abstraction’ of human activity as pure muscle energy expended in the course of factory production. For Chakrabarty, History 2 demonstrates that a comprehensive history of capital “cannot escape the politics of the diverse ways of being human.”

Thus, Chakrabarty concludes, “...‘capital’ becomes a site where both the universal history of capital and the politics of human belonging are allowed to interrupt each other’s narrative.”¹³ For him, it is in this sense that ‘capital’ is a universal category. For those scholars who measure capital’s universalizing tendency by its ability to subjugate the aspects of History 2 that do not contribute to its reproduction, the global history of capital, Chakrabarty declares, would always be incomplete. A critique of historicism may be attempted, he suggests, “by insisting that historical debates about transition to capitalism must also, if they are not to replicate structures of historicist logic, think of such transition as ‘translational’ processes.”¹⁴ From the perspective of the Postcolonial Studies collective, the Indian colonial state was neither ‘semi-capitalist’ nor ‘pre-modern’, much as the subaltern classes in Guha’s example were not ‘pre-political’.

Indeed, “History 1 constitutively but unevenly

modified by more and less powerful History 2s”— the latter being unique to the pre-colonial and colonial situation – gives rise to what Chakrabarty terms an ‘alternative modernity’¹³. A self-possessed phenomenon, it remains unmoved by the paradigmatic narrative of infinite progress with which the West seeks to ‘enchant’ its Other. As such, Chakrabarty writes, the strategy of historicizing is “both indispensable and inadequate in representing this particular case of non-European modernity.”¹⁴

Here, it becomes productive to consider Fredric Jameson’s theorization of modernity, which differs from all postulations of the phenomenon presented thus far in this text. First, modernity for Jameson is an epistemic category that configures a dialectic between breaks and periods in history on the basis of compelling discourses of temporality and subjectivity. It is for this reason, Jameson argues, that it would be tempting for ideologues of modernity “to separate out the various national traditions, and to identify a certain order and logic (or non-logic) specific to each one.”¹⁵ However, it is precisely because modernity is a narrative mode and not a historical particular, Jameson declares, that it is singular. Viewed from this perspective, Chakrabarty’s proposition is rendered paradoxical. Second, Jameson would argue that the terminology deployed by Chakrabarty only serves to reinforce the discourse of desire and lack it seeks to undermine – it does not transcend connotations of inauthenticity and marginality. As such, it risks interpretation as a symptom of chronic anxiety couched in the language of postmodernity, that is,

of perpetual difference.

Returning to the concerns of the Postcolonial Studies collective, one could now consider how the paradigm of historicism encompasses conceptions of non-European nationalisms and renders them a ‘derivative discourse’. Once again, it becomes the task of the postcolonial critic to salvage a creative moment for the colonial and postcolonial situation. In his first text on Indian nationalism, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 1986, Partha Chatterjee provides a comprehensive survey of liberal and materialist engagements with the history of nationalism. In one account, nationalism emerges when cultural homogeneity is necessitated by the ‘objective, inescapable’ logic of industrialized society. The construction of a distinct national identity entails the selection of those aspects of ‘traditional’ culture that are conducive to codification for the “requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication. (Nationalism) is the establishment of an anonymous, impersonal society...held together...by a shared culture...in place of a previous complex structure of local groups, sustained by folk cultures reproduced locally and idiosyncratically by the micro-groups themselves.”¹⁶ However, although nationalism could appropriate some elements of pre-existing cultures and even transform them, it could not ‘use’ all. Ernest Gellner argues that the universal acceptance of the logic of industrialism enables societies to transcend the problem of incommensurability and inter-cultural relativism, ‘somehow or other.’ “What is relevant is that

(they)...do manage to overcome it..."¹⁶

Although Gellner does not dwell on the subject of relativism, he acknowledges the difficulty it poses. It is precisely with the elaboration of this problem that liberal critics of nationalism are concerned. While the emergence of nationalism in the West is explained by the "sociological requirements of industrial society", its deferral in non-Western cultures may also be justified by recourse to sociology¹⁶. An objective, systematic identification of various local cultures and economic conditions followed by a sympathetic understanding of the resistance these factors pose to the attainment of the "universal values of reason, liberty and progress" is in order here¹⁶. Such investigation could explain sparks of religious/non-secular nationalisms as inevitable reactions of a hapless people to oppression and dominance by Western powers that justified themselves as catalysts of civilization. Moreover, recognition of the arduous journey to historical development that lies ahead of these societies need not hasten the understanding that nationalism (as defined by the West) has already failed in the non-Western context.

For Chatterjee, it is the Marxist scholar Benedict Anderson's seminal text, 'Imagined Communities', 1983, that provides respite from the heavy-handed and patronizing theories of nationalism mentioned above. Anderson eschews understandings of the nation as a determinate product of external, sociological factors such as industrialization, religion, race, or community. Rather, he conceives of it as an ideological creation. Such a construct, Anderson avers, was

made possible by a fundamental shift from the conception of the world in terms of religious communities and dynastic realms. He elaborates, "What, in a positive sense, made...new communities imaginable was a half-fortuitous, but explosive interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity."¹⁷ Thus, the nation is a form of political community that cannot be envisaged without an understanding of temporality as secular, homogenous and empty. Historically, Anderson expounds, three 'models' of nationalism emerged: a) the 'Creole nationalism' of the Americas which was effected by lower economic classes who, inspired by Enlightenment thought, protested against the imperial order, b) the secular 'linguistic nationalisms' of nineteenth-century Europe that became a precedent for the "independent national state"¹⁸, c) the 'official nationalism' instituted by Russia, which "involved the imposition of cultural homogeneity...through state action"¹⁸.

Anti-colonial or Third World nationalisms that emerged in the twentieth-century, Anderson argues, inevitably derive from the above-mentioned paradigms, and thus acquire a 'modular character' – "They can, and do, draw on more than a century and a half of human experience and three earlier models of nationalism."¹⁹ To the extent that Anderson posits a transformation of socio-economic relations and the imposition of cultural homogeneity through the formation of a 'print-language' as pre-

conditions of the nation form, Chatterjee notes that Anderson's theory – premised though it is on a definition of the nation as an intangible entity – does not escape the trappings of sociological determinism. However, he concurs that Anderson's postulation of print-capitalism as a determinate of the nation form is more credible and sophisticated than Gellner's position on the imperative of industrialization.

Moreover, Chatterjee does not dispute Anderson's understanding of anti-colonial nationalisms as modular. Rather, he seeks to investigate the complexities and contradictions involved in the process by which these nationalisms acquire such a character. His efforts are oriented towards an understanding of the relations amongst "thought, culture and power" as made manifest in the tensions between colonialism and nationalism²⁰. Referring to the particularities of Bengali colonial history, he asks: a) how is a specific cultural identity to be constructed in the interests of a willed political entity – i.e. the nation – when indigenous elitist cultural 'reformers' who "could be said to have favored the transformation of a medieval agrarian society into a rational modern one were not unambiguously nationalist, while (the subaltern classes) that were opposed to colonial domination were not necessarily in favor of a transformation"?²⁰ ; b) Does the knowledge espoused by Western – and therefore 'alien' – categories and frameworks of thought "have different social consequences when projected on different socio-cultural situations"?²⁰ Further, "do the categories and theoretical relations

themselves acquire new meanings in their new cultural context?"²⁰; and, c) When relations between the theoretical frameworks to be imposed and the recipient culture are mapped along the axes of domination and subordination respectively, "what, in the new cultural context, are the specific changes which occur in the original categories and relations within the domain of thought?"²⁰. At stake in all of the above questions is an understanding of how power relations change within the society under domination.

Thus, Chatterjee provides a framework within which the relations between values that claim universal import and cultural alterity could be negotiated. Above all, however, Chatterjee remains deeply concerned with the ambivalent and problematic ontology of anti-colonial nationalism. He concludes, "Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonized people; it also asserted that a backward nation could 'modernize' itself while retaining its cultural identity. It thus produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based. How are we to sort out these contradictory elements in nationalist discourse?"²¹

As it were, Chatterjee sought to paper over the very contradiction he had emphasized in the afore mentioned thesis by perceiving the following statement at face-value in his book, *The Nation and its Fragments*, 1993: 'Nationalism asserted that a nation could 'modernize' itself

while retaining its cultural identity.' Published in the decade that followed the end of the Cold War and the concomitant 'end of history', this opus may be considered as a protest against a First World, late-capitalist milieu that, complacent in the wake of its triumph over 'evil', could now undertake the task of assimilating all forms of cultural difference within its ambit, thereby inoculating them.

Here, Chatterjee questions the very claim that Third World, twentieth-century nationalisms are modular by nature. As he puts it, "If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain 'modular' forms made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?"²² Further, Chatterjee asserts, "The most powerful as well as the most creative results of the nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa are posited not on an identity but on a difference with the 'modular' forms of the national society propagated by the modern West."²² Chatterjee supports this argument by stating that anti-colonial nationalism in India constructed for itself a sovereign territory within the domain of the colonial state before it confronted imperial power in the attempt to bring a distinct political unit into existence. The domain that this nationalism created bore all the 'essential' marks of indigenous, yet modern, cultural identity; as such it distinguished itself from issues of statecraft and technological development that were now assigned to an 'external domain' of politics. Returning to the example of native cultural reformers cited in his previous work, Chatterjee

now suggests that two phases may be noted in the period of Indian social reform: in the first phase nationalist sentiment among reformers was ambiguous and they sought cultural transformation through state action. In the latter phase, however, although the imperative for cultural reform was acknowledged, native agents were loath to allow state interference in matters of 'national culture'. It was during this phase, Chatterjee argues, that nationalism proper was consolidated. Thus he contends against Anderson's theorization of nationalism as purely political in content.

Further, Chatterjee claims that the distinction between public and private subjectivity, necessitated by the establishment of the postcolonial state in accordance with liberal ideology, could not be mapped onto that between the spheres of interiority and exteriority constituted by colonial nationalist elites. He concludes, "Here lies the root of our postcolonial misery: not in our inability to think out new forms of the modern community but in our surrender to (Western) forms of the modern state. If the nation is an imagined community and if nations must also take the form of states, then our theoretical language must allow us to talk about community and state at the same time. I do not think our present theoretical language allows us to do this."²³

To summarize, Guha highlights practices of subaltern agency that defy understanding within the discourse of liberalism; nonetheless, he insists on representing them as political. For

Chakrabarty, modes of socio-economic relations that remain unencumbered by the imperatives of paradigmatic, teleological narratives unequivocally merit representation as modern. Moreover, in Chatterjee's lexicon, autonomous imaginations of colonial cultural community are represented as nationalist. To represent: to speak for, to re-present. Can colonial histories – invariably written over the very signification that renders them subaltern – speak? Will our present theoretical language allow this? - *S.H.*

1 Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, (New York: Verso, 2013), p. 3.

2 Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. viii.

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography*, in *Nepantla: Views from South* 1:1, 2000, p. 12.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

10 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 9.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

15 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay*

on the Ontology of the Present, (New York: Verso, 2002), p. 100.

16 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, (London: Zed Books, 1986), p. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

22 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 5.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

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