

Theory and method in Indian intellectual history

Report >
South Asia

How suitable are the concepts, theories and methods with which we try to understand historical events and social circumstances? In western intellectual history these are issues that have been matters of ongoing discussion for decades. The seminar *Theory and Method in Indian Intellectual History* addressed these issues for Indian intellectual history.

Theory and Method in Indian Intellectual History
28-29 June 2004
Paris

By Saraju Rath

The seminar aimed to critically reflect on: (1) theoretical and methodological presuppositions in contemporary research based on primary sources – texts, manuscripts and inscriptions; and (2) modern theories and methods of intellectual history and of the anthropology and sociology of knowledge: to what extent are they applicable to pre-modern India, where the production, reception and transmission of texts took place in conditions and configurations that were often entirely different from those in Europe?

The seminar was based on the participants' work in diverse disciplines of the Sanskrit tradition in sixteenth to eighteenth century India. These include logic (K. Preisendanz and J. Ganeri),

medical scholarship (D. Wujastyk), grammar (J. Bronkhorst and J. Houben), astronomy (C. Minkowski), poetics (Y. Bronner, Tel Aviv, and G. Tubb), Vedic hermeneutics (L. McCrea), moral code (M. Deshpande) and political thought (S. Pollock). In this brief report, I focus on three papers.

Approaches to Indian philosophy

The papers by Preisendanz and Ganeri illustrate different approaches to Indian philosophy and its sources. Preisendanz adopted a philological, but philosophically sensitive approach, and focused on the genre in which most philosophical literature in premodern India is written: the commentary. She discussed the availability of various types of commentaries, and the implications for our understanding of the philosophical content. One may distinguish between creative works introducing new ideas (often by defending an ancient position against later attacks) and philosophically unproductive expositions. Regarding a com-

mentary as philosophically unproductive or not depends on one's view on what is philosophically important or unimportant. Just as some have regarded the whole of Western philosophy as a footnote to Plato, it has been suggested (e.g. by Otto Strauss) that the entire Navya-Nyāya literature is a mere refinement and sophistication of Gaṅgeśa's definitions, whereas others (Daniell H. Ingalls, B.K. Matilal) found the same literature innovative in logic and theory of language.

Truth and objectivity

Ganeri too discussed problems of theory and method in the study of texts in Indian logic. He argued that intellectual disciplines or 'knowledge systems' of premodern India take 'truth' to be a regulative ideal. Even the well-known traditionalism or fidelity to the tradition he sees as instrumental to the attainment of truth. Contemporary intellectual historians who examine the work of premodern Indian philosophers should address questions of motivation, objectivity and critical engagement. The rest of Ganeri's paper addressed questions of objectivity, drawing attention to Amartya Sen's elaboration of the idea of 'positional objectivity' as outlined in his article 'Interpreting India's Past' and in his latest book *Rationality and Freedom*.

Jīvānanda

Dominik Wujastyk's paper focused on the production of medical literature under the patronage of the Tanjavur court, around 1700 C.E. Tanjavur was at that time under the reign of Śāhaji, himself a prolific author in five languages (Sanskrit, Marāṭhī, Telugu, Tamil and Braj Bhasa), who founded a colony of learned Brahmins in the village of Tirvīśainallūr on the banks of the river Kāveri in South India.

The work of Vedakavi (fl. ca. 1700-1735) claims Wujastyk's special attention. Vedakavi was author of the *Jīvānandana*, a unique medical didactic drama in seven acts, first staged at the Maratha court of Śāhaji, Ekoji's son. The kingdom of disease under its king, Consumption (*yakṣman*) assails the royal capital of the body and tries to drive the Soul (*jīva*), King of the body, from his realm. For the audience, the drama probably had an added layer of reference: the military and political struggle through which Śāhaji's father Ekoji assumed power in Tanjavur.

Research on Vedakavi and other authors connected to the Tanjavur court includes claims by Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam that the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century witnessed the arrival of a certain kind of modernity in South India, manifested in a rich historiographical literature, mainly in Telugu. Wujastyk,

unconvinced by these claims, argues that these developments in Telugu history writing do not live up to Western and international standards of historiography in developing objective ways of reading the past. On the other hand, he finds Anthony Giddens' presentation of the concept of modernity (which includes a new way of dealing with history) unconvincing. It takes developments in Europe as the starting point and concludes after long deliberation that modernity is indeed a Western project.

Although it may seem a waste of time to scholars working on the rich treasury of unexplored Sanskrit sources such as manuscripts in various Indian scripts, it is important and fascinating for scholars engaged in Indological research to occasionally pause and reflect on the theoretical and methodological choices they have made. As the organizers observed, 'these issues rarely have been directly addressed by Indologists themselves, despite the fact that intellectual history, broadly conceived, constitutes their dominant disciplinary practice'. ◀

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On 28-29 June 2004, the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris hosted the Seminar 'Theory and Method in Indian Intellectual History'. The Seminar was organized by S. Pollock (Chicago) and J.E.M. Houben (Paris) and was supported by the international research group Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism, Chicago, and the International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden. Publication of the proceedings are envisaged.

Chinese Overseas studies coming of age

Report >
Overseas Chinese

The Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas addressed the latest trends in the field. A once parochial study has over the past decades attracted multidisciplinary interest. Studies of Chinese migration today belong among general studies on human mobility.

ISSCO V
10-14 May 2004
Elsinore, Denmark

By Mette Thuno

In the recent past, 'Overseas Chinese' studies typically addressed the local historical, legal, political and cultural status of settled ethnic Chinese communities and their difficulties in 'planting roots' in host societies. Academic interest focused on the economic and cultural transformation of established communities and the consequences for ethnic relations and national integration. These studies were often counterpoised against sociological theories of assimilation and national ideologies favouring cultural sameness and hegemony.

The recent opening of the People's Republic of China for the emigration of students, skilled and unskilled labour and processes of globalisation are fuelling Chinese migration as well as new scholarly responses to the phenomenon of Chinese global mobility. Studies – both contemporary and historical – are moving away from the culturally and ethnically particular

towards an understanding of Chinese migration as part of general global migration processes. Moreover, studies on ethnic Chinese communities in particular settings are being replaced by research that foregrounds fluidity in settlement patterns and in perceptions of belonging.

Not just migrants...

Wang Gungwu of National Singapore University argued for a qualitatively more varied conceptualisation of Chinese migration. Previous studies had focused on unskilled male migrants from south-eastern China settling and integrating in particular destination countries. Recent developments are prompting scholars to consider Chinese migration a less homogenous phenomenon.

Like their predecessors from Taiwan, increasing numbers of students from the PRC have in the past decades travelled overseas to pursue higher studies. Many do not immediately return after graduation, and find themselves contemplating migranhood. Wang argued that these overseas students only live migrant-like existences. Their understandings of home and nationality are

more flexible today – they may see themselves as living in a multipolar world rather than as migrant settlers in a new country.

A number of papers at the conference challenged conventional notions of Chinese migration as either resulting in sojourning or settlement. Theoretical frameworks making use of transnational or circulatory notions of migration and more fluid conceptions of 'home' were deemed more appropriate for overseas students and technology professionals.

... nor exceptional

Geographer Ronald Skeldon of the University of Sussex argued against the emphasis on Chinese exceptionalism in Chinese overseas studies. In the wake of globalisation, Chinese migration is and should be accepted as part of human migration in general. According to Skeldon, Chinese migration could be regarded as exceptional when only mobile, unskilled young men became marginal minorities in countries of settlement. Today, Chinese migrants, like other migrants, enter destination countries as potential citizens in multicultural societies rather

than as sojourners. Skeldon also took issue with recent assumptions of transnationalism and circulation in migration studies, arguing instead for an understanding of mobility evolving into integration and assimilation in destination countries.

Skeldon also argued that conceiving highly heterogeneous Chinese migration as 'diasporas' was deceptive, essentialising Chinese migrants into a community of Chinese overseas. This point was later taken up in a number of papers on Chinese ethnic economies and entrepreneurship. Several economists argued persuasively for an analysis of ethnic Chinese businesses as part of local and global economic structures rather than as culturally determined ethnic businesses. Others showed how Chinese entrepreneurship is increasingly contingent on economic globalisation with movement from one desti-

nation to another, rather than unskilled migration to a permanent destination of settlement.

The latest developments within the field of Chinese migration will be published in an edited volume by Mette Thuno. The volume will be based on the research presented at Copenhagen conference, and is scheduled to appear by the end of 2005. Other papers from the conference will appear in a new peer-reviewed journal – *Journal of Chinese Overseas* – soon to be published by Singapore University Press. ◀

Mette Thuno is associate professor at the Department of Asian Studies, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Her latest work is *Transnational Chinese: Fujianese in Europe* (Stanford University Press, 2004), co-authored with Frank Pieke, Pal Nyeri and Antonella Ceccagno.

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