DE GRUYTER MOUTON
DOI 10.1515/css-2014-0049 — Chinese Semiotic Studies 10(4): 549-563

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Semiotic Challenges in India

Abstract: Is India's legacy of intellectual supremacy at odds with the vast landscape of the everyday? In the context of Modernity, everything social, cultural and political is subject to interpretative filters. How do we make sense of any of these, or all of these? Several slippages of meanings, several residues, and lengthy 'liminal' spaces characterize the semiotic landscape of contemporary India. Do we understand negotiations, between the past, the present and the continuous of some of the significant cultural discourses in contemporary India as dialogues? Dialogue is also a genre of discourse and can be seen as the modality itself of thought The roles of the traditional postulates like 'Maya', 'Dharma' and 'Rasa' for example as cosmological schema, readily translatable interpretative frameworks in contemporary discourses has often been questioned by critical theory in modern India. Critics are also of the view that, in Rasa theory, the human onlooker is just a locus and not an active agent in what is a global alchemy of properties and perceptions. The same, according to them, can be said of Dharma as an inhuman theodicy that often exists over and above the movements of detection, discovery, reasoning and proof in modern methods of justice.

Keywords: continuity; dialogue; identity; modernity; theories of signification; public cultures

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1 Introduction: The First Dialogue

Indian Medieval logic is said to have been filled with a struggle between Realism and Nominalism just like in the Middle Ages in Europe. The debate has persisted and contemporary Indian academia is still divided and persists rather assiduously. The twenty-first century also witnessed a growing emphasis on a broader notion of Nominalism (set forth in the twentieth century by the British), with a new generation of academic scholarship in the post-liberalization phase of the economy. India is a context-sensitive society and the Indian schema of cyclicity and simultaneity stands in sharp contrast with the Western linearity of

time and thought, as does the binary schema and the search for certainty in the uncertainty schema of the Indian mind. Indian philosophers had conceived of life as being driven by contexts, unlike the egalitarian, democratic ideals, Protestant Christianity, and the post-renaissance quest for universal laws. Ramanujan (1986) says that even 'time' and 'space', the universal contexts, have properties and varying specific densities that affect those who dwell in them. Hegel, he quotes, once noted, that; 'While we say, Bravery is a virtue', the Hindus say on the contrary, bravery is a virtue of the Kshatriyas' (Hegel, in 1827: Part 1, Section 2).

Commentaries on Indian theories of signification have pointed out two main traditions in India. There is the tradition of the grammarians whose main preoccupation was to present and preserve the purity and the sanctity of the language of the scriptures as the sound of the Vedas was eternal and so was their significance. These efforts led to the emergence of great grammarians like Panini (fifth century BC), who gave the world one of the most precise descriptions of phonology and morphology of any language.[1] This tradition culminated in the philosophical and conceptual contributions by Bharthari (fifth century BC), who emphasized the unity of the sentence in his well-known theory of 'Sphota' (speech production). According to Bharthari, the individual words derive their significance from the sentence they are a part of. As the sentence remains primarily a grammatical construct, he concentrated on formal semantics. Language was considered to be naturally significant. The relation between the signifier and the signified was fixed in the sense that humans neither create nor change this relation. The task of the grammarian, he theorized, was to describe and explain this formal aspect of their language. The central tenet of these theories was to elaborate on the relationship between language and reality. The relationship was said to a 'perpetual' one and the nature of the relationship was through the conjunction of 'Nama' (name, conception, construct) and 'Rupa' (form, physical object). The Vedic discourse, the Buddhist Vaibhasika system ('Vibhasa', commentary by the master himself) and the grammarian Bharatrihari gave the Word, ('Sabda') potency and power to create/destroy and were in a symbiotic relationship with reality.

The second was the nominalist, Buddhist tradition, which considered language as conventional and the words or sentences were said to derive their

1 The references to Indian and Buddhist traditions have relied on the following: 'Paradigm of Hindu-Buddhist Relations', Evam- forum on Indian representation, 1&2, 2004, and Gil (ed.) 2002, *Signification in Language and Culture*.

significance from the way they were first imposed on the subjects, the way these objects were understood. The Buddhist logicians, beginning with Nagarjuna (2nd Cen CE), consider language as a manmade conventional institution. This is the essence of the theory of 'Apoha'. As early as the sixth and the seventh century BC, the Buddhist logicians, Dignaga and Dharmakriti, proposed a theory of signification and creativity called 'Apoha'. 'Apoha' asserts that nothing is understood by itself in isolation. All comprehension is highly complex, dialectical and a relational process. This encompassed all relational but distinct entities of human discourses. All forms are re-organized, re-arranged and re-constructed in the domain of these conceptual constructs. The ever-changing and ever-transforming nature of the signifying phenomena is recognized as the basic hypothesis of all understanding and creativity. A fairly corresponding theory of signification and creativity was seen in the works of the French Philosopher Pierre Abelard.[2] Like the Buddhist logicians Abelard was also negotiating a theoretical space between the extreme Realists and the extreme Nominalists (the followers of Plato and Aristotle). According to the Buddhists and Abelard then, 'all creative discourses are specific articulations of specific perceptions of specific existential experiences'. This view further emphasizes on the significant presence of the Individual even within a social group. It calls for a dialectical relationship between the individual (Parole) and that of the group, the social (Langue). Challenging the overwhelming emphasis on 'Synchrony' since Saussure, H. S. Gill (2002), an illustrious Indian philosopher and semiotician, asserts that there is no such thing as a static structure or system whether we deal with Synchrony or Diachrony. And he supports his argument by bringing to the fore the Buddhist theory of 'eternal flux' to understand human creativity. Whatever be the discursive formation, it cannot be ignored that all synchronic structures are diachronically constituted.

Gill further raises the problem of the existence of a Structure. The dialectical and dichotomizing nature of the signifying process emphasizes the inevitable co-presence of Structure and Anti-Structure. The being, he says, can neither exist nor function without the other. Gill finds the absence of a theoretical realization of the concept of Anti-Structure throughout the structuralist movement and its reincarnations in Post-structuralism and post-modernism as rather intriguing. He believes that it was Andre Martinet (*Economie des changement phonetiques*) and Michel Foucault (Theory of Erosion and Archealogy of Knowledge) who made any serious effort to understand it. The

2 For a detailed account of the similarities between Abelard and the Buddhists, see *Signification in Language and Culture*, Gill (ed.) 2002.

Buddhist theory of Apoha shows the obligatory co-existence of the Being and the Other, and is not (as commonly understood) a theory of negation. It is a highly creative theoretical framework of signification in which the dialectical relation is far from static. The Being and the Other are held together in a relationship of simultaneity and reciprocity.[3]

2 Continuity, Disjunction or Liminal? The Slippage of Meaning in Modern India

How does one reconcile the inheritance of powerful philosophical frameworks with the ground level texts in Modern India? A big challenge in the twenty-first century came in the form of the communication revolution and the growing influence of satellite networks. All of a sudden the country was thrown into a tizzy by notions of 'self', which seemed to raise questions about freedom of the mind, the displaced Indians and a whole new assertion and challenge to the erstwhile caste system. Indian popular culture was in the midst of all this and soon became an important sociological text reflecting and fighting opposing views. Nationalism and nationhood became a thriving debate in the wake of a new capitalist era that fought with a receding era of agricultural sustenance and thus changed the idea of nation to memory and nostalgia of a displaced Indian. The comfort of being a citizen was replaced by an unsure, insecure and anxious Indian, who found solace in projected images of Indianness, particularly through India's popular culture and cinematic imagery. Political ideology in the 1990s in support of 'realism' and its incumbent adherence to structures of patriarchy, male power and the ideal of 'Ram', the ultimate symbol of 'male virtues' within the country, took a nasty turn with the further splintering among religious citizens; the 'self' and the 'other' came to be located within the nation's fabric as a post-colonial tragedy. Indian academia was engaged in keeping pace with these events, as also with partisan politics embroiled in the

3 Kapil Kapoor, an eminent Indian scholar and a prominent voice of the Indian grammatical tradition, asserts that Indian literary theories are empirical responses to what is still an 'oral culture' – even the term for verbal compositions, 'vangmaya' literally means that which has existence in/which is permeated by speech. Stemming from this is the anonymity or serial authorship of texts, and hence the non-pertinence of authorial meaning, the need to designate the author as 'composer' (rather than writer) and the receiver of the text as 'auditor' rather than 'reader' (Johnson used the term 'auditor' in his Preface to Shakespeare).

controversy of 'whose India'? Indian Youth amidst this tension was exploding with newfound excitement in technology and communication, particularly the World Wide Web and the last decade has seen a virtual world that has made the youth impatient with the country's realities. Amidst all this was the urban discourse, undoubtedly the central fixation of public cultures in India, transforming the cultural fabric of the nation.

The Urban discourse is a space of experimentation and critique in which the oppositions between the village and the city create frameworks of meaning. The city holds a phenomenal allure, but it is also divided by moral ambivalence seen in the eulogization of village life in Indian cinema for over four decades now and it is this ambivalence that characterizes the 'modern' in India.

> The traditional idea that the city and the village are counterparts of each other has engaged them both in a spirited dialogue and mutual criticism and enriched both. The dialogue and the criticism have constituted a healthy baseline of social criticism among ordinary citizens and made them recognize the limits of the urbane and the pastoral. Nandy (2011)[4]

Nandy's view is that the city is often projected and seen as an uninhabitable place but from which a return is never possible. This is a fact that is lived by millions of migrants to the cities in India today, who, like Indian cinema's fascination for the metropolis, see it as a negative and a decaying space. Public cultures in India are thought of as a nexus of overlapping discourses' and interests that exist in a state of tension.

Thriving around all over is a visually powerful popular imagery widely prevalent today. Indian cities, as Jain (2004) says, offer a cornucopia of images: from brilliant billboards along the streets and facades, Bollywood posters in taxis, buses, restaurants and shops, to film, a steadily growing number of magazines, and the new omnipresence of the TV screen. India's modern popular imagery, it has often been stated, results from the major cultural and technological shifts during the nineteenth century. Mass production of images, new means of visualizing myths and religious legends generated new fields of tension in the sacred, erotic, political and colonial landscapes. The prevailing eclecticism of visuality frequently led to an arbitrariness in piling up images from diverse visual sources, developing an ambivalent language of collage and

4 Ashish Nandy in an interview with *Pratilipi*, a bilingual literary journal.

citation that further facilitated the seizure of new aesthetic and cultural content.[5]

> The present day outburst of the visual image as evident in advertising companies on billboards, calendars, stickers, magazines, posters, in TV broadcasts and films and the proliferation of material all over the Indian cities - in restaurants and shops, on the roadside and over the facades of buildings, in taxis, trucks and buses, has played a major role in shaping the Indian population´s identity in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion and power as well as changing their personal and social values - alongside more importantly in forging ideological conceptions of the nation itself. (Jain 2004)[6]

As India and Indians weave and negotiate modernity through filters of time and experiences, the nation we see as an image seems more like a eulogy, a representation of 'modern social cohesion' but is actually the 'cultural shreds and patches' that are 'arbitrary historical interventions' made to piece together a unified, youthful, ideal. In colonial India, people came to fit the categories that the British had made for them. Sudipto Kaviraj, India's eminent political scientist, in his history of communities, says that communities in pre-British India had fuzzy boundaries; in British India, they came to be enumerated. David Bennet (1998), in his insightful account of ethnicity in India, says that in modern India, the shift from fuzzy boundaries to enumerated ones did not alter the change of consciousness. He asserts that in everyday life, the people are quite comfortable with the indeterminate identities and share none of the tenacity of labels imposed on them by the social scientists or government. Yet, the ethnic labels suggest a modern public career and national identity amongst these, being the biggest. This meaning according to Bennet, resides alongside with the fuzzy sense of community. He states ironically that this is how the modern world of the nation state is structured; it is united but internally hierarchized, and some countries are declared as 'measurably' more advanced than others. As he further asserts, today, there are newspapers published in 75 different languages in India; the middle class has tasted consumption, which has increased the competition in urban life; secessionists' aspirations have grown in Kashmir, Punjab and Assam in recent years and 'caste' has become a contentious issue in India's public sphere.

5 Extracted from the concept note on the exhibition "Indian Popular Culture: The conquest of the world as a picture".

6 Jyotindra Jain in his concept outline for the exhibition "Indian Popular Culture: The conquest of the world as a picture" held in New Delhi in October 2004.

A prominent contemporary thinker and critic Homi Bhaba (1994) says that we have to address questions of nation as narration within the disjunctive time of India's modernity because this modernity is caught between 'political rationality and its impasse, between the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of a nationalist pedagogy'. Bhabha calls the nation a symbolic power that produces a continual slippage of categories like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia or 'cultural difference' in the act of writing the nation. The nation, he postulates, is the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity that requires a skill of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centered causal logic. These are 'fissures' of the present becoming rhetorical figures of a national past that address us modern Indians, to fix the meaning of what a nation should be today and in the future. In his view of the nation as a temporal process, he asserts that the 'nation's claim to modernity, as an autonomous or sovereign form of political rationality, is particularly questionable'.

3 Gandhi as a Memory in Modern India

Every sign, according to Umberto Eco, is the result of the operations of modes of sign productions. And these modes correspond with the codes and their semantic markers. For any sign to qualify as a semiotic judgment, it has to necessarily pass through a 'meta semiotic' statement within a 'coded' cultural context.[7] Gandhi is a powerful Super-Sign that India can claim to have experienced in modern India. 'Gandhi is a leader' was a Meta semiotic judgment in the context of the struggle for Indian Independence. But his iconic status, the body, that carried the cultural burden of a political struggle, made way for 'Gandhi is a Mahatma' as a semiotic judgment that corresponds with conventional codes of the semantic marker attributed to iconic signs in India. The body is one, but the idea of the icon is split among multiple references.

How is meaning and message located in absence? Gandhi is the most powerful Super-Sign that India can claim to have experienced.[8] His death left a meaning gap in the world. "The loss of sign value at his assassination, and the silence after his death, made it a loss of huge disarray of meanings. Gandhi's discourse exists in the subconscious dream work, of condensation and

7 See Eco 1976 for a detailed explanation of the 'Theories of Sign Production'.
8 This with reference to Umberto Eco's notion of the 'Super-Sign'.

displacement".[9] Central to the Gandhian discourse was a set of signs that were consciously created as attempts to bring Indians under one ideology and create identities of commonality and shared universes, and along with it acknowledge the indigenous and the local. Khadi (the indigenous production of cotton fabric) was a significant signifier of this public discourse. In an insightful analysis, Gonsalves (2012) says that it was also meant to obliterate distinctions of all kinds and every aspect of Khadi was a strong signifier – the fabric, cut and even the color. Over a course of time, he adds, Khadi developed into a mask or a stage costume for personal political advancement and was a quasi symbol of commonness with the masses. It was also perceived as the opposite end of technological progress. But yet, according to this reading, Gandhi's attempts at socio-cultural and socio-religious subversion through Khadi were not as successful. Gandhi was only too aware of the resistance he would encounter when challenging an economic order. But he was adamant and wanted to make the village as the unit of production and help rural India develop a voice. He wanted labor to be the foundation of production and the people to be the agents of transformation.

Modern India is clearly not a template for cohesive symbols, but khadi has certainly remained for most part symbolic of nationhood, of a pristine, and nostalgic past of India that even today offers a sense of belonging every time the average Indian seeks to invoke clarity in his/her mind. This was the power of Gandhi as a Super Sign and of Gandhi's ability to draw and infuse energies of a million people into the signifiers he chose to infiltrate dreams of a modern nation. Gandhi today is like an open text, according to sociologist and psychoanalyst, Ashish Nandy (2000); everybody reads what they want to read in the sign. Nandy says,

> 'Shaman' is the closest one can get to Gandhi's persona. The descent in Gandhi was his ability to unfreeze our worldviews and make us ambivalent and envision an alternative worldview. Today, we cannot think of alternative worlds despite clearer visions. We are unable to project utopias without a continuum from the past, to the present and to the future. But to be able to imagine a utopia with a break from the past and the future was Gandhi's descent. We are afraid of using Utopias as criticism or reflect on existing society.[10]

Nandy distinguishes among four Gandhis. The First Gandhi, Nandy theorizes, is the Gandhi of the Indian state and Indian nationalism; the second

9 Quoted from Rukmini Bhaya Nayar's talk on Gandhi as a signifier at Gandhi Ashram, Seminar on Gandhi, January 30, 2008.

10 "Gandhi after Gandhi" in *The Little Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May 2000), pp. 38–41).

Gandhi is that of the Gandhians, who 'do not touch politics'. The third Gandhi is the Gandhi of the 'Ragamuffins, eccentrics and the unpredictable' and is more hostile to Coca-Cola than to Scotch whisky and considers the local versions of Coca-Cola more dangerous than imported ones. The Fourth Gandhi walks the mean streets of the world threatening the status quo and pompous bullies in every area of life. It is the fourth Gandhi that is being unleashed today as 'Brand Gandhigiri' in Bollywood films and challenges the semantically hierarchized components in the structure of the Super-Sign as sign system.[11] Because any of these Gandhis can 'stand in' or 'stand for' 'Gandhi' the ideology, the thought, and that was how Gandhi sought to reinvent himself. Branding, as Gandhi has demonstrated, cannot be an external exercise. It has to be a process of internalization, an encoding and a dissemination that can transcend time and space. Critics have expressed concern over trivialization of Gandhi's Satyagrahain popular Hindi films and the popularization of Gandhigiri, amongst the masses.[12] But as Ghosh and Basu (2006) say, this "trivialization is necessitated by a decidedly debased contemporaneity. Gandhigiri and 'dadagiri' (bullying) as shown in the films, become implicitly interchangeable".

Evoking the spirit of Gandhi's Satyagraha movement, a recent anti-graft campaign in India led by a Gandhian, Anna Hazare, in 2012 seemed to have taken the nation by a storm on a core national concern – corruption in the Indian government. Through mass rallies across the country and a 12-day hunger strike, Anna Hazare united Indians across social, religious, political, regional and linguistic borders. After a long time, India as a nation had come together on a political platform, and for once it was not just the game of cricket. The entire campaign was played out on the lines of the Gandhian discourse, following the rules, but it lacked the power and the symbolic sustenance that Gandhi had provided to the country. It lacked the imaginations that Gandhi had about what a nation should be. The movement could not even synecdochically stand for the Super-Sign's name. The movement, as expected, fell apart and is today mired in an internal rift, unable to hold itself together. It was a soul-stirring experience for thousands of urban Indians, but none seemed to know how to sustain the momentum. It was a quasi brand, not Brand Gandhi.

11 'Gandhigiri' denotes the practice in everyday life of Gandhi's philosophy and principles.

12 'Satyagaha', a word derived from Sanskrit, translates into "insistence of truth". Gandhi practiced the philosophy of Satyagraha in his nonviolent civil resistance in the Indian freedom struggle. Satyagraha influenced Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King in their Civil Rights Movements.

4 The Crisis in Modern Psychology

The field of psychology has thrown up another critical dialogue. Indian scriptures dating back thousands of years extensively dealt with the analysis of states of mind and the contents of mental activities. Without any rigid distinction between psychology, religion and philosophy, the overriding concern was to help individuals in the pursuit of self-realization as the source of all suffering was supposed to be within the self.

In pursuit of harmony between body, mind and spirit, the yoga system evolved very sophisticated mind control techniques. In the work of indigenous psychologists, this 'going back to origins' is marked with a concurrent blurring of history, political developments and history of the development of ideas. However, in the West, psychology had moved away from theology and philosophy, and had developed an inquiry based on natural science models. This was appealing to Indian psychologists, who saw an opportunity to develop a secular identity distinct from religion and philosophy. Ashish Nandy (1974), India's leading psychoanalyst says that the western educated psychologists were also aware that it cannot yield in-depth analysis of the socio-psychological problems of Indian society; it could also not establish durable links with Indian traditions and belief systems. Nandy further states that the encounter between an ancient culture, with its distinctive culture of science, and an exogenous science, with its own distinctive culture, led to a fracture of self-definition of many of them.

It was a very difficult situation for Indian psychologists, who were trying hard to balance polarities: metaphysical versus empirical; clinical versus experimental; intuitive versus objective. Nandy also points out that, despite being trained as scientists, Indians find it difficult to pursue objective realities, a prerogative of the western mind. Their attempts to replicate or validate popular theories from the west was a failure because of lack of rigor, lack of direction in theory and ideology or even understanding the implications of transferring methods across contexts. Referring to Sudhir Kakar (1982), Nandy says that these conflicts failed to see solutions. Kakar has talked of the aesthetic satisfaction of a Hindu myth residing in a full savoring of both the extremes and not seeking a synthesis.

Indian psychologists thus lived simultaneously in two different worlds without any significant overlap. The question remains: Has the enterprise of psychology been useful to (the future of) the common man in India; is it needed

and used to intervene, address or ameliorate some of the burning socio-economic problems in India (Kumar 2006)?[13] Also important here is to understand what individual-societal needs some of the regressive practices serve instead of merely condemning them. And that is where Indian psychology would have nested within.

5 Folk Idiom in a New Context

Another dialogue that the country has witnessed is between folk art and its modern translations. With reference to two important folk art traditions, Patta painting in Bengal and Gond art in central India, Madhya Pradesh, art has transcended its geographical boundaries and has created a very vibrant space for itself in the modern art traditions that are displayed in art exhibitions and art fairs. The aesthetics of these art forms unfortunately have been left out of scholarly reflections, or have been viewed as part of a consensual collective tradition. Chatterji (2012) says it was unfortunate that the folk artists were relegated to the 'essentialists' in Oriental perspectives. As a result, they were insulated in a pristine, organic, spiritual state that was always under threat in encounters with modernism and western materiality.

But some modernistic views on these folk traditions have given us the essence of these arts that is considered to be surrealistic, and that which privileged the formal aesthetic values of simplification and abstraction. Gurusadav Dutt, an eminent art critic, has described the profound spiritual reality and joy (ananda) that was reflected in their art. Folk artists according to him mastered the inner, spiritual reality and the outer physical form, which helped them to persist with a fierce sense of independence and vibrancy in the face of persecutions that had relegated them to the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. Subsequently, influenced by folk art and its ahistorical quality, Gond artists for example were encouraged to find their own modes of expression without any interference. Art accordingly to this view involves a notion of timelessness, and is part of a continuous present.

13 The author here refers to problems such as high illiteracy rates in rural India, the prevalence of culpable practices such as female infanticide, low female education rates, violence against women, rampant dowry harassment, child labor, discriminatory caste politics, poor coverage and impact of rural education and development programs, marginalization and exploitation of backward castes, tribes, minority groups, etc.

Formalism in the folk arts was seen as signs whose primary function is not to communicate a search for meaning. Rather, they work through affect-impersonal emotions that traverse the artwork itself. But according to the modernist canon, artistic signs are not supposed to be a part of a determinate syntax. They are supposed to blur the relationship to context so that easy intelligibility becomes difficult. Gond art, on the other hand, has strong roots in the Bardic tradition, but also looks to contemporary art for sustenance. The art form is figurative and abstract enough to capture modernism and its concerns with purity of form and color. The artists think of forms as design elements and suggested a timelessness that did not link up to any myth or legend. It is a strategy of de-contextualization that helped these artists creates a new genre suitable to modernism.[14]

6 Identity Dialogues: Art and the Indian Diaspora

Identity has been a recurrent preoccupation amongst the Indian diaspora around the world. This is particularly evident in some of the artwork of migrants that goes all out to articulate multicultural identities and their 'peculiar doubleness'.[15] Many Asian Punjabi artists from the UK, for example, celebrate the insularity of the Indian family and traditions through their art and consciously keep the cultural 'other' out of the context. The color palette is as vibrant as the colors of traditions and locale back home. They do not display any tension between the two worlds, but just choose to keep one world out of the frame, or shown in harmony with one another. Deep emotional attachment to their roots, and to the idyllic, self-sufficient Indian family system is the over-arching theme in most of the artworks.

Digging into cultural resources is a dominant theme across cross-cultural cinema and music as well. In artwork in particular, it is interesting to see a heightened sense of the 'monocultural', almost celebrating the ideal of a stereotypical, happy Indian family ignoring tensions that exist otherwise. The concern here is that in doing so, the over-emphasis on ethnicity could have ended up orientalizing the self. And this may not be different for cinema or literature as well.

14 An argument well elaborated by Chatterji 2012.

15 See Singh 2010 for a reading of Punjabi artists and their art in the context of multiculturalism.

7 Conclusion

The issue however is much more critical and is one of translations between epistemes, particularly marked in modern Indian narratives across the spectrum, in domains such as Indian cinema and the debate on realism, or between a 'body', like Gandhi, and the question of 'which Gandhi', in the contexts such as folk aesthetics and its modern translations, popular culture in contemporary India, discourses of rehabilitation in public spaces, and even the food culture in India, amongst other issues.[16] What is the role of theories of signification in such a context? Will they serve as heuristic devices to orient us towards what we remember, restore or renew? A whole body of work in twenty-first century India is witness to questions of this nature, and a frequent borrowing from the western frameworks, in an overwhelming critical enquiry and search for identities, national or migrant. These are challenging times as we see projects of modernity, racing ahead to fulfill economic dreams in a Janus-like manner, looking behind to pick up threads of the archaic, adjust to the western path of the socio-semiotic, and looking ahead to catch up with the growing techno-semiotic society. In the last two decades, the debate between the preservation and assertion of the archaic and the hesitant modern realist narrations has created ideological walls in academia resulting in an outpouring into the media and popular culture backed by a vehement political ideology of Hinduism as the nation's representative religion.

Kapoor (2001) says that there is a need of 'Indianness' of critical practices and of nativizing critical discourses. He asserts that Sanskrit poetics is the natural answer to questions of Indian aesthetics and its cultural, linguistic and historical appropriateness. He objects to relegating Indian theories to archeological interests, as there has been no break in the continuous and cumulative intellectual traditions in different domains of knowledge. He further establishes that the whole terminology of Indian literary theories – rasa, dhvani, alamkara, vakrokti, etc. – is the living vocabulary of Indian languages.[17]

However, critical theory in recent times has charted an important course in appreciating the ways in which postulates such as rasa, dharma or maya, are "always already cited, dialecticized, semiotically contaminated, translated and rendered discursive by modern cinematic format" (Basu 2002). Calling them

16 For a detailed discussion on modern Indian narratives, see Dwyer and Pinney 2001.

17 Kapoor has also argued for the continuity of Indian philosophical thought in daily exchanges and in popular cultural and social practices such as 'katha' (storytelling) and 'pravacana' (religious discourses).

'cinematic assemblages' these significant discourses on Indian cinema and Indian popular culture have attempted to put together a 'Pan Indian' tradition that does not claim to any origin, or authenticity. As has been asserted by significant anthropological studies, it is indeed difficult to create distinct differences between the 'high' and 'low' cultures in a post-colonial flux. And it is for this reason that they have called them public cultures, with a view to escape the dichotomy between 'high' and 'low' and also capture the nature of the cosmopolitan and the modern in India. The efforts have also included attempts to theorize forms of transnational global cultural flows given the reality that India is no longer a well-bounded and stable society like most parts of the world in the context of a global village. But they have also insisted that India's public culture is a zone of cultural debate rather than an arena of consensus and agreement. However, it is not a space characterized by major cultural divides (like between 'high' and 'low'). Neither is it a space for the binaries between 'unity' and 'diversity'. Radical subaltern perspectives that characterize much of India's so-called little traditions were earlier excluded from signs of modernity, in efforts to understand India as a 'unified whole' (Dumont 1981).

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