DIALOGUES ON DECOLONISATION

How and why do certain ideas become transformative in academia and in other areas of creative, critical and educational practice?

A Humanities in India initiative held
weekly from April–June 2021

University of East Anglia

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Introduction to the Series of Dialogues on Decolonisation

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Since 2016, a series of conversations, discussions and meetings has developed between a group of colleagues at UEA and in India. The focus of those conversations has been on the idea of inventing a new curriculum for the Arts and Humanities. One of the stipulations of that work has been the thought that a new curriculum of this kind could not be confined by the perspective of one national culture or, indeed, of any one world area culture (such as Global North or South, East or West, Asia or Europe, etc.), but that it needed to emerge precisely out of a dialogue between different cultures, different texts, and different contexts.

This curriculum development work came to coincide with the specific initiative to 'decolonise the curriculum'. We hope to use this Series of Dialogues on Decolonisation to develop our understanding of teaching at UEA and elsewhere, and to develop people's understanding of the link between teaching and 'decolonising the curriculum', invoking the range and complexity of this phrase as well as what it stands for and what it compels, whether in terms of student activism, educational reform or social justice.

Clearly, our perspective is only one amongst a number, and we hope that this Series will offer opportunities for us to develop links with other groups and other initiatives in this area. It is worth adding that this Series has been recorded, and it will be available as an online learning resource.

Readers may be interested to note that the Series is the latest initiative pertaining to UEA's 'Humanities in India' partnerships programme, which is an important facet of UEA's India Dialogue initiative. Over time, our 'Humanities in India' work has deepened the connection between students and researchers in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at UEA and the University's focus on internationalisation, sustainability and social responsibility. It has also engendered many enriching seminars, webinars, conferences and collaborations involving exponents of the Humanities in India and the UK. A note is provided at the end of this booklet on UEA's India Dialogue.

A comment on the format of the Dialogues on Decolonisation webinars: each of the speakers was invited to talk about a keyword, which they could connect to the question that is being discussed. They each speak for about five minutes to that keyword. Then they go on to develop a conversation between the two, on the basis of what they have both said. This leads to a moment when each asks the other about what has emerged for them during the course of the conversation. Then the session is opened up to questions from the audience. As space is limited in this booklet, only the introductory remarks have been transcribed in full. Readers are encouraged to listen in to the overall webinars, to develop a fuller appreciation of the conversations and the topics raised. Readers will note that some minor modifications have been made to the transcript, in order to generate further clarity on some points.

This booklet also contains thematic learning and teaching resources, which were prepared by one of our UEA student associates, Ms Laura Ali (an MA student on the Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies programme; Department of Art History and World Art Studies). Readers engaging with this Series – whether in view of this booklet alone, or in a closer conjunction with the webinars themselves and additional learning materials – will be able to generate compelling insights on the topics of Dialogue and Decolonisation. These may perhaps lead towards a better understanding of the interplay between the micro- and macro-contexts of decolonisation, or the significance of this particular phase of academic and social decolonisation in respect of previous and future ones.

One area of concern that, as organisers, we hoped to address through the Series was the proposition that the term decolonisation has multiple meanings and, as such, a resonance and a reach that is still largely untested, especially in terms of the methods and rationales that typically underpin both 'teaching' and 'learning' in Higher Education. The idea that decolonisation is, by definition, transformative is articulated in the headline question that oriented the Series as a whole: How and why do certain ideas become transformative in academia and in other areas of creative, critical and educational practice? In raising this question, we attempted to give space for articulations of 'decolonisation' that may necessarily either be, or need to remain, self-effacing. A productive and close 'reading' of the series may thus be attuned to the dynamics afforded by different speakers to the very ideas of decolonisation and transformation. In other words, we may either want or need to question how and to what extent the power inequalities that are either intimated, framed, or opposed by decolonisation actually reach us: whether as speakers in the Series, as teachers and learners in Higher Education, or as global citizens. And what impact, meaning and visibility do these inequalities and their pedagogic, social and cultural consequences actually have, whether for ourselves or for others?

In an effort to engage different subject areas in the Humanities, the Series raised specific questions directed to exponents of particular disciplines and professions. These questions were devised by the organising group, in view of the findings of a number of previous 'Humanities in India' events held previously in Kolkata (India) and Norwich (UK), which were geared towards curriculum development and social sustainability. We therefore encourage our readers to work productively with the multi-dimensional nature of 'dialogue': whether in its immediate conversational, inter-personal or inter-disciplinary guise, or as a more complex mechanism through which ideas are conceived, people are involved, partnerships are sustained, and reforms are instituted.

Webinars

What is the Role of Academic Leadership in Decolonising the Curriculum?

28 April 2021
Samir Das (University of Calcutta) and
Sarah Barrow (HUM, UEA)

What are Creative Ideas and How Are They Valued?

5 May 2021
Amit Chaudhuri (Ashoka University) and
Jon Cook (LDC, UEA)

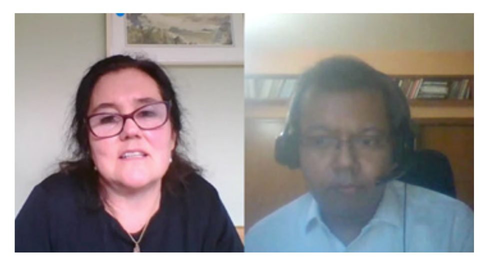
How do Indigenous Lives Matter to Academics?

12 May 2021
Ruby Hembrom (Adivaani) and
Daniel Rycroft (AMA, UEA)

NOT RECORDED

What is Participatory Curriculum Development?

19 May 2021
Sayantan Dasgupta (Jadavpur University) and
Cecilia Rossi (BCLT)



Can and Should Trauma and Victimhood be Taught?

26 May 2021
Rukmini Nair (IIT Delhi) and
Tiffany Atkinson (LDC, UEA)

Are Human Rights Universal (and Have They Ever Been So)?

2 June 2021
Vinay Lal (UCLA) and
Cathie Carmichael (HIS, UEA)

What Freedoms are Anticipated by Theatres of the Oppressed?

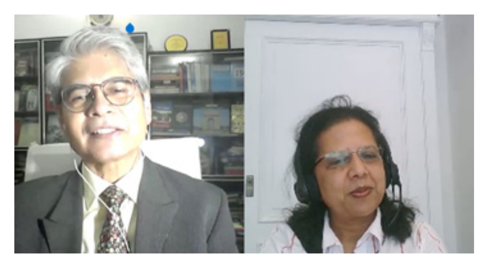
9 June 2021
Sanjoy Ganguly (Jana Sanskriti) and
Ralph Yarrow (LDC, UEA)

Can Culture be Decolonised?

16 June 2021
Sona Datta (curator) and
Rosinka Chaudhuri (CSSSC)

Should the Political Philosophy of the Indian State Feature in Contemporary Dialogues on Decolonisation?

23 June 2021
Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach (Free University)
and **Amb. Asoke Mukerji**



Transcripts

What is the Role of Academic Leadership in Decolonising the Curriculum?

28 April 2021
Samir Das (University of Calcutta) and
Sarah Barrow (HUM, UEA)

Keywords:
Undoing | **Civilisation** | **Dialogue**

Preamble: With both speakers having at some point served as Deans of Humanities, each is well-placed to share insights and experiences on the issue of academic leadership. Whether leadership is defined through pre-determined institutional frameworks or else encouraged across all age groups and social groups, the process of curriculum development must be thought about in respect of the need and aspirations of different stakeholders and diverse ethnicities. As both speakers address, dialogic approaches to decolonisation in Higher Education are a prerequisite for meaningful change. The conversation yields important points concerning the practical nature and the complexity of dialogic thinking, dialogic action, and dialogic learning.

Sarah Barrow

Our question, and the role of academic leadership in decolonising the curriculum, is vast. To be able to approach this via a keyword was really interesting: to be able to go in forensically into one idea. After doing various readings, which word jumps out at me and actually leads me down a path? I was quite intrigued by the word Undoing. I like the sense of process, the simplicity of it, as well as the vast complexity of it. I like the fact that quietly and gently, but hopefully explicitly, it presents subversion: maybe not full-on revolution, but certainly a sense of something happening. Undoing what? Well, that could be all sorts of things, so I will try to pin it down a little. I want to just reflect on the process of 'undoing' colonisation, in this respect of dismantling the structures of power that have been developed by dominance. This dominance has been developed by largely white, western, largely male societies, nations, cultures, and languages.

I started my academic life as a linguist, and I think that this led me to want to better understand the cultures whose languages I am trying to learn and get to grips with. I am going to argue that the challenge for academic leadership is to create the spaces, the places, the forum – which you Jon and Dan are doing, as academic leaders here – for these kinds of dialogues, for 'dialogues of undoing' to take place: to let others lead the debate. So, while it is really lovely to be here today introducing this, I am so glad that there are going to be many other voices, as part of this series.

I look forward to doing some listening, to those. So, as part of that undoing, one needs to become comfortable or, at least, prepared to have one's position dismantled. I am certainly prepared to have my position dismantled, in whatever way anybody wants to do that! It must happen. We must keep evolving, and undoing. Given the way that colonialism has permeated all aspects of our lives, the goal of full decolonisation may sometimes seem elusive or hopeless. And yet the momentum gained in recent years and recent months is undeniable, impressive, powerful, overwhelming, and exciting. For some, of course, it may be unnerving, disruptive, disorientating especially, as a critique of the so-called status quo of hegemonic forces is vital to this work. Though it is also important for a 'process of empowerment' to be created, and supported for those who have been colonised, whose ideas, ways of life, and culture have been denied, neglected, undermined, or attacked. What we need, of course, are processes of self-determination, since the political movements of decolonisation have really been at the heart of those.

Those who support this work, including those in academic leadership, need to understand that it actually should result in a redistribution of power: a reassessment and rearrangement of the structures of power, a reassignment or an adjustment of control towards losing, sharing but certainly changing. I think that one goal of initiatives such as our Vice-Chancellor's task force for tackling racism at UEA should be a reassessment and rearrangement of the structures of power. Of course, it should result in dismantling and rearranging perspectives: questioning fixed views, demanding that stories are told and listened to from many different perspectives.

> **"Given the way that colonialism has permeated all aspects of our lives, the goal of full decolonisation may sometimes seem elusive or hopeless. And yet the momentum gained in recent years and recent months is undeniable, impressive, powerful, overwhelming, and exciting. … Leaders need to persist, if the undoing is to take place, if the fullest range of stories are to be revealed and heard, and if the power structures are to be adjusted. Objectives have to be agreed, set, reviewed, and landmarks and milestones celebrated, disappointments recognised, and then new avenues explored."**

Certainly, the work that I am involved in from research sites is all about story-telling. I am not doing the story-telling. My stories are not important. It is the listening and it is the finding out, it is the creating and helping to create, providing the frameworks and the platforms for those stories to come to the fore. The absent should be made present, and actively invited to participate. This takes work, energy, living with disappointment and criticism, on behalf of those who try to make this happen. Because the goal can seem quite elusive, it can often seem as if no progress is being made. Energies and motivation can quickly become sapped, or anger can well up. Leaders need to persist, if the undoing is to take place, if the fullest range of stories are to be revealed and heard, and if the power structures are to be adjusted. Objectives have to be agreed, set, reviewed, and landmarks and milestones celebrated, disappointments recognised, and then new avenues explored. As noted in a recent publication in *Education Studies*, by scholars at Warwick University on decolonisation, this term decolonisation itself refers to the undoing of colonial rule over subordinate countries, but it has taken on a wider meaning as the freeing of minds from colonial ideology, in particular by addressing the engrained idea that to be colonised was to be inferior.

Decolonisation offers a powerful metaphor for those wanting to critique positions of power, and dominant culture. I believe, therefore, that our challenge is one of letting go: becoming confident, comfortable, and ready to relinquish power by letting others in, and letting others lead and thereby take things in new directions, to create new pathways. But we have to provide the framework for that. It should also be about providing fuller versions of history, which reflect injustices and laud the contributions of so many more people. Above all, it should mean to be open to critique and reform: to confront legacies, to undo and become undone.

Samir Das

A few years back, I was asked to frame a social science curriculum for a university, then newly set up in a tribal-dominated region of India. (In India we use the terms tribe and tribal freely, without any sense of guilt. In fact, these terms are officially used, for example in respect of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Areas, and used in popular circles as well.) I received the clear instruction that I should frame this social science curriculum in a way that would cater to the immediate social and cultural context of the region. I was all too happy with the good work that we had done. As soon as I returned, I was called by the Vice-Chancellor of that university to come to teach, ironically not the students but the teachers who had no idea about how they could handle that curriculum.

This story is instructive, at least on three counts. First, in most of the newly set-up 'tribal' universities, the social science curriculum looks more or less the same as that of other universities. I could well realise that the educational reformer Macaulay's desire, of 'civilising the colonised', reproduces itself at unforeseeably diverse levels, sharpening in this case the colonial divide between the 'mainstream' and the 'tribal' universities, due to the uncontested power of non-tribal knowledge systems.

Secondly, there is no doubt that the desire to 'decolonise the curriculum' is equally strong and intense, as is evident in the request that the curriculum I was implementing should respond to the tribal contexts of the region.

Thirdly, notwithstanding the strong desire, we could also ascertain the impossibility of any history-decolonisation project, due to the nature of internal colonialism in India, via the power of the mainstream to disregard tribal and Adivasi (indigenous) experiences, aspirations, and ontologies.

How does one address the statement – concerning academic leadership – while striving to 'decolonise the curriculum'? One, albeit exuberant, answer is to reject the existing curriculum altogether, thus questioning the underlying assumptions behind the entire system that we had inherited, whether from colonialism or from mainstream India, and had continued to run without addressing basic questions concerning regional perspectives and their social relevance.

Besides, there is the basic danger that the colonised, in the name of decolonisation, easily slides into a form of, what I would describe as, crude nativism: the process of working with and identifying with simplistic markers of cultural difference, rather than with the complex and contested histories of identity construction and self-differentiation, whether in terms of political, social, economic, linguistic, ethnic, or educational issues. This equally threatens to 'colonise' many others by virtue of its power over the mind, and its impact on how one then thinks of oneself, in relation to others, as the mainstream universities do.

In view of the above anecdote, we can become reasonably certain that decolonisation is not going to mark a complete break from colonial forms of knowledge and curriculum anytime soon. The project of decolonisation is expected to be long drawn-out and protracted and, I suspect, endless. Transformative ideas work at an incredibly slow pace. The challenge is as much to see how colonial forms of knowledge respond to the lived-reality of the concerned region, as it is to bring the latter's knowledge systems and ideas of civilisation to bear on the prevailing colonial forms. So, it has to

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operate both ways. If the colonial, and mainstream or non-tribal forms of knowledge draw on the self-complacency and arrogance of their own civilisation, Rabindranath Tagore looks upon civilisation as a restraining influence. It reins-in (a) the excesses that nations in the West are seen to commit, with disastrous consequences, and (b) the knowledge that these nations seek to disseminate while trying to civilise others.

It is rabid nationalism that masquerades as civilisation in the West. We are therefore left with a series of gaps, not so much in knowledge itself but in the distance that operates as the defining points or markers of difference between identities, nations, nativisms, civilisations, etc. Tagore would have argued that if this is the template of our understanding of decolonisation then we will not be able to bring it to fruition, as it is premised on fixed notions of difference, rather than on the principles and values of mutual respect, mutual recognition, humanism, human dignity, pluralism, dialogue, social change etc. So, I see a twofold role for academic leadership.

1. To break the ice, and to take the first step to initiate dialogues of this kind across cultures and between civilisations. Perhaps, the conditions are not conducive to this. For one thing, never before in history have the colonial systems of knowledge been suffering from as much anxiety – of performing the universals that they once set for themselves – as they are now. Democracy is an example. The desire on the part of the colonised, to learn from the colonial knowledge systems has lost much of its appeal. The figure of the colonised looks much more strident than it was, say a couple of decades back.
2. The academic leaders can help in the process of institutionalising the dialogue, and factor it into the systems of teaching, evaluation, and career advancement. For that to happen, it is also necessary to experiment with different forms of dialoging, for the generation and dissemination of knowledge, since there is no one golden way of conducting dialogue. Dialogue will have to neutralise the power-effects of colonialism.

Considering that we are passing through an acute resource crisis, and facing severe restrictions on our free mobility at the moment, academic leaders can pair up small groups of faculty members and scholars with common academic interests, and encourage them to conduct an endless series of dialogues, sharing courses and classrooms, and then furnishing a report on what emerges from them. It is important that these reports on small group discussions and dialogues are finally collected and collated by the leaders, in terms of making recommendations and suggesting concrete steps towards decolonisation. If I had to sum up my discussion, Civilisation is a central keyword. Crude nativism, dialogue, performing the universals, and desire of the colonised might be the others.

Transcripts

What are Creative Ideas and How Are They Valued?

5 May 2021
Amit Chaudhuri (Ashoka University) and
Jon Cook (LDC, UEA)

Keywords:
Resistance | **Enchantment**

Preamble: As leading exponents of creative writing, and related forms of understanding, both speakers engage the intersections of culture and politics, and of expression and interpretation. If decolonisation is apprehended as a creative idea, how does it generate significance and power amongst other creative ideas, and other creative processes? The dialogue presents a unique opportunity for each speaker to meditate on noteworthy literary histories and exchanges that, in the case of Amit Chaudhuri especially, encompass a matrix of personal memories, literary characters, and intertextual oscillations. The conversation extends into a close analysis of the selected keywords, focusing on the productive ambiguity between enchantment and disenchantment, as well as the multiple political and literary dimensions of resistance.

Jon Cook

There are two questions that are before us: ‘what are creative ideas?’ is one of them, and ‘how are they valued?’ is the second. I am going to be concerned more with the first question than the second, but I will hope to take up the second later in the discussion. And I guess that there is a third question that is not in the title, but is lurking in the wings, and that is ‘whether decolonisation is itself a creative idea?’ Before I come to my keyword, I have two initial comments on how we might go about identifying creative ideas as a way of approaching our first question.

The first of them would be by way of examples, examples that we intuitively or traditionally take to be creative ideas. So, in this way of thinking, ‘collage’ would be a creative idea. The practice often associated with Braque and Picasso, of cubist painting: of taking bits of newspaper, or train tickets, and sticking them to the surface of their paintings. Or, you could go on to add, from about the same period in the early twentieth century, ‘montage’ in cinema; or, the thought that the language of literature could estrange what is familiar, that it should make the familiar world seem unnerving even to us, as Kafka does in *The Metamorphosis* (1915).

So, one could multiply examples like this, and then just pause and say, ‘okay, are there any characteristics that they have in common?’ It would be an infinite labour, I think. But it is certainly one way of beginning to grasp what we mean by ‘creative idea’. Let me just comment, already, on two characteristics that seem to me to be emerging there. One is that creative ideas are often associated, in my mind, with a certain kind of playfulness. Collage being one example of that: a kind of playfulness that had to do with 'well, what if we tried to do this? What would the result be?' And the other thing is that they are connected to practice, I think: they are connected to the nourishing of an ongoing art form, or way of life.

So, examples might be one way. The second way would be through a search for an essence, or something that identifies all creative ideas as creative. Last week in this series, Samir Das referred to the dialogues of Plato when he was thinking about the nature of dialogue itself. There's an example of this kind of thinking about the essence of creativity in one of Plato's dialogues, 'The Symposium', where in a remarkable speech the philosopher Socrates suggests that the highest expression of love and the greatest form of life is in the contemplation of the ideal form of beauty: a contemplation which itself begets further creative ideas. This was a thought that was echoed many centuries later by the poet W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) when he thought of 'Those images that yet fresh images beget' (written in 'Byzantium', 1930).

> **"The idea of non-violent resistance, which has had various locations but of course is especially connected with the work and practice of Mahatma Gandhi and, indeed, played a crucial role in the decolonisation of India. ... Another example of this connection, that the 'thought of resistance' makes with politics, is, of course, the connection that it might make between politics and art: the acts of political resistance that find their voice in a form of art, which both expresses resistance 'spirit' and takes on this power of resistance 'spirit' by way of fusing an individual and a collective voice."**

Now, all that must seem like a kind of nonsense to us now. I mean, the idea that there could be such a thing as the ideal form of beauty, let alone the idea that there could be such a thing as beauty itself. But one thing that I take from that essentialist thought is that creativity – the creative idea – does have the property perhaps of begetting (or generating) creative ideas in others. That is one of the ways of gauging its creativity, of getting a measure of what it is that makes it creative.

Now, my way of thinking is going to be between these two: between examples and essences. What I want to suggest is a characteristic of creative ideas. I do not think that it is necessarily going to apply to all creative ideas, but I think it applies to some of them in a way that is worth thinking about and carrying forward. And this leads me to my keyword, which is the connection between a creative idea and the thought of resistance. So, resistance is my keyword. And here are three brief elaborations, before I finish on that thought: the 'thought of resistance'.

Obviously, one connection that it makes is between creative ideas and politics. Politics might be thought of precisely, in terms of the way in which resistance begets counter-resistance, which in turn begets further resistance. But let me take, as one example of a creative idea in politics, the idea of non-violent resistance, which has had various locations but of course is especially connected with the work and practice of Mahatma Gandhi and, indeed, played a crucial role in the decolonisation of India. Just staying with that thought for a moment longer, the value of non-violent resistance is to help us to realise that creative ideas are not only ideas that are at work in the arts or artistic invention. It is very important, I think, to be sensitive and alert to the way in which creative ideas can occur in all domains of life, in all sorts of activity.

Another example of this connection, that the 'thought of resistance' makes with politics, is, of course, the connection that it might make between politics and art: the acts of political resistance that find their voice in a form of art, which both expresses resistance 'spirit' and takes on this power of resistance 'spirit' by way of fusing an individual and a collective voice. One notable example of that, in my experience, is the songs of Aretha Franklin (1942-2018) at around the time of the civil rights movement in the United States: songs like 'Respect' (by Otis Redding) or 'A Change is Gonna Come' (by Sam Cooke).

But there is a danger here, and this leads me on to my second suggestion: there is a danger, I think, of confining the idea of resistance to politics alone and also, more dangerously than that, to the politics that we approve of. Resistance is politically equivocal. There is a very interesting book by the American scholar, Corey Robin, on the nature of *The Reactionary Mind*. One thing that this very eloquently shows us, is how creative and persuasive the conservative resistance to movements of equality has been in producing political ideas over at least two centuries. Quite apart from that political equivocation in the idea of resistance and creativity, I think that there is a need to loosen still further the thought that resistance simply points us in the direction of the political. Here, I want to come to my final example of a connection between resistance and creativity. It comes from the work of an American poet, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), and an essay that he published in 1943 called 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words'. In this essay, he imagined the work of imagination in the following terms: 'It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.'

Now, there is an obvious context for this remark of Stevens, and that is that he was writing during the Second World War, and therefore that what he had in mind was the violence of war and the way that the imagination might push back against that. But as the context of the essay makes clear, he has got much more in mind than just the violence of war. In fact, the context makes clear that one of the things that he also has in mind is a kind of violence that he ascribes to modern media: to the endless influx of information, image, narrative that he associates with living in modernity. And this leads me to a phrase that Stevens does not use, but I think very clearly has in mind. And that is the tendency of media to 'colonise the mind', and how that colonisation might be resisted. In Stevens' case, it was not resisted by writing explicitly political poems, or striking poses of resistance, or making calls for people to resist the incursions of modern media. His response, rather, was to use poetry as a way of creating a space in which words, and language more generally, could renew their imaginative life. In order to do that, he needed to use poems to recreate the spaces around words and enable their creativity in a way he felt modern media disallowed.

Amit Chaudhuri

Jon, thank you for bringing in Yeats and 'Byzantium'. This is such a weird coincidence. Last night, at about midnight, I suddenly insisted upon reading out lines from 'Byzantium' to my wife, to Rinka [Rosinka]. And I read out the very lines that you referred to and quoted briefly: 'those images that yet fresh images beget'. As you know, I first thought that my keyword was going to be Modernism, or Modern, Modernity, but then I decided maybe I would make it Enchantment, and bring modernism and modernity into that. But before I go to my keyword, I want to touch briefly on Yeats and this poem, since you brought them up.

I have actually written about these lines, and a few other lines from 'Among School Children', in my novel *The Immortals* (2009). Even here, we have a certain modulation being introduced by Yeats to the idea of creativity and the history of creativity, which I reflect on in *The Immortals*: where I have Nirmalya, the young man – the teenager who is just getting into Indian classical music – who is trying to understand what this musical system is, what this lineage is. He is reflecting on the raga, and then he is reflecting on this curious fact that the raga has no author. And, of course, he has grown up in a kind of post-enlightenment milieu where you take the idea – that things are written by authors, compositions are composed by composers – and a culture is the sum total. If you are talking about the culture of music, this sum total would comprise not only of its compositions but also its composers, and in the culture of writing, writing is the sum total not only of works that have been written but also of authors.

Here, Nirmalya is confronting a system in which there is no author, there is no composer. The raga arrives without a composer. Of course, in pre-enlightenment Europe, and in that culture of Byzantium which Yeats is looking at, the idea of the author must be somewhat secondary to the anonymous plethora of images that form culture and our lives, our experience of life, and our experience of wonder and devotion, whether it is to art or to something else.

So, the author then is dispensable. It is not just the author that has the power to beget: images beget images. Yeats is making a tiny modulation there, about how we understand art usually, in a Western tradition, to do with art-as-product, by shifting it to art-as-producer, art-as-creator. That is why the images beget fresh images. In ‘Among School Children’, he makes the same sort of argument. And, in *The Immortals*, Nirmalya thinks of both these poems when he is trying to understand the raga, and how we might assign value in a musical tradition, which is a great musical tradition but has no Bachs, Beethovens, or Mozarts. So, in ‘Among School Children’ (1928) he is talking about the fresco images in a church, it is a bit like Byzantium. Yeats says: ‘Both nuns and mothers worship images, But those the candles light are not as those That animate a mother’s reveries …’, that is to say that these are not real children or real people. ‘… But keep a marble or a bronze repose. And yet they too break hearts …’, so it is not just people who break hearts. This world, this mythic world, affects us: just as we think only the emotional domains of living beings do. We make too clear a demarcation between the living, and the fictional. This is what Yeats is taking issue with over here. We cannot have such a clear demarcation as to what occupies our mental and our emotional world. So, they too hurt us: and yet, they too break hearts.

And then he shifts: ‘O Presences …’ by ‘presences’ he is referring not to authors and composers or artists but artworks. The artworks here are the presences that he is referring to. ‘O Presences that passion, piety or affection knows, and that all heavenly glory symbolise – O self-born mockers of man’s enterprise.’ Here it is again, flame begotten of flame, image of image: self-born. Again the author, and the idea of us producing art, is sidelined. Rather, it is art producing art, and us. This is a modulation that Yeats is making, having been exposed, I think, to other cultures. So, from the late-nineteenth century onwards, or maybe earlier, right into the twentieth, the assumptions to do with authorship, individuality, art, and how one produces the other, are being challenged: challenged by the new exposure to other cultures, where miraculous things are happening without these concepts, and that make these concepts dispensable. That kind of awareness makes these lines by Yeats, or the articulation by Yeats, possible.

“Creativity … is a result of re-enchantment, of being and becoming free. And this ‘becoming free’ comes from this huge exposure to – and taking onboard of – other cultures.”

So, when I say enchantment, when I say modernism, I want to draw in another lineage of creativity and creative ideas, which also comes from, and is located in, this churning that is taking place from the late-eighteenth century into the nineteenth century, and that in the late-nineteenth century becomes powerful, and then leads to modernism, I think. In India, by the late-nineteenth century and Rabindranath Tagore, you already have modernism. By modernism, over here, I mean a turn from (and against) the representational. That is my idiosyncratic and succinct summarising of what, for me, modernism powerfully is. It is dispensing with representational forms and representational themes, and means of representation. Both the genre of representation and the movement beyond or against representation are under stress. All genres of representation and artworks that articulate what they are, by virtue of their form or their participation in a genre, for example as a painting, as a novel, are under pressure.

This fragmenting of the representational is placed in a Western history of ideas and creativity, or in a Western history of fragmentation or putative fragmentation, in its wonderfully integrated world, which is a bigger myth than any religious myth. So, the integrated world of Europe: the first waning of that integrated world is not seen as a fragmentation at all, but a binding force: the emergence of humanism and the human in the renaissance, when religion goes into the sidelines. So, the first emergence, with the older world going into the sidelines, might seem like a wonderful triumphalist moment of reason, rationality, light there: the enlightenment. But, according to historians of Western creativity and ideas, by the late-nineteenth century all of that is under pressure and things are fragmenting. They are fragmenting, because that world of integrity is in ruins, for a number of reasons. The fragmenting then becomes an allegory. The fragmenting through creative means – as you Jon mentioned, such as collage, montage – that become an allegory of the unavailability of the unity of Western culture.

So, it becomes synonymous. It becomes synonymous with the modern, it becomes disenchanted. It becomes part of the process of disenchantment. I would, in fact, say that fragmenting, and the turn from the representational, the turn from the unitary, is a process of re-enchantment. The unitary is a tyranny. The representational is a tyranny. Modernism and jazz and various other non-representational forms, for example atonal music, free jazz, improvisation, have such energy and joy precisely because they are unshackled from what was a dead end, a disenchanted dead end: the dead end of the unitary, the tired dead end that the renaissance began to go towards and the nineteenth century – in the light of reason, neo-classicism – must have found itself in, and wanted to break out of.

So, I would hardly say that fragmentation – creativity in modernity and in modernism – is a result of disenchantment. It is a result of re-enchantment, of being and becoming free. And this ‘becoming free’ comes, again, from this huge exposure to – and taking onboard of – other cultures. So, place that same history of ideas in this history, where it has to be placed: of this exposure to other cultures. Do not place it in Western history, or as an allegory of Western history, as it is seen from the outside and written from the outside. Place it there, and you see it very differently.

Transcripts

How do Indigenous Lives Matter to Academics?

12 May 2021
Ruby Hembrom (Adivaani) and **Daniel Rycroft**
(Department of Art History and World Art Studies, UEA)

Keywords:
Voice (Vaani) | **Adivasi Studies**

Preamble: This webinar was not recorded due to a technical fault. Rather than their attempting either to reproduce the event or to construct a summary of each of their main points, the speakers would prefer to submit a joint statement, with a view to opening up future discussions on this and related questions.

Joint Statement

In view of the ongoing inequalities that pertain to (a) relations of power, (b) issues of respect and visibility, as well as (c) the fragmented nature of learning experiences and opportunities, the question of how Adivasi or Indigenous lives matter to academics raises a number of timely concerns. At the most immediate level, one is compelled – in view of this question – to engage Adivasis as specific people, rather than as a demographic category or as a 'civilisational' problem.

It is also worth noting, however, in view of the ongoing debate concerning whether or not Adivasis (literally: 'original inhabitants') should merit national and international recognition as Indigenous Peoples, that in addressing this question one can also confront the power and significance of mainstream perceptions of Adivasis in India, which often have the effect of marginalising and sometimes silencing Adivasi people. So, we need to think about the psychological, educational, and cultural effects of centuries of oppression, and the processes of reconciliation afforded by non-Adivasi leaders in modern India, in terms of affirmative action. More importantly, we need to acknowledge the collective 'voice' or Vaani of India's Adivasis, and the capacity of this voice, namely the Adi-vaani, to remember pain whilst also navigating a future beyond the simple institutionalisation of victimhood.

We need therefore to cultivate a new kind of intercultural dialogue and a process of listening that is able and willing to understand the depth, diversity and at times fragmented nature of this voice and the shared experiences of resistance, resilience, and hope that it attends to. In view of the fact that many Adivasi scholars, students, and educators, as well as Adivasi entrepreneurs, activists and philosophers, are now asserting rights-based approaches to livelihoods, knowledge, and citizenship, the issues of participation, visibility, and communication, as well as of understanding, human dignity and wellbeing each assume high levels of importance as factors that can contribute to this intercultural ethic.

We need to ensure that this ethic has, over time, the potential to disrupt the power and reach of dominant or mainstream representations of Adivasi culture and experience. As participants in this specific Dialogue on Decolonisation, we wanted to address the potential role to be played by Adivasi and non-Adivasi students, scholars, and writers both in fashioning this intercultural ethic, and ensuring that it becomes sustainable and accessible to all sections of society. This might require a new kind of holistic and literally 'joined up' approach to Higher Education, whether in India or beyond, that is capable of making the necessary structural, curriculum and attitudinal changes to ensure that Adivasi and Indigenous interests are not only accommodated within, but also made integral to, future learning: especially in terms of how and why it might promote the diversity and complexity of Adivasi citizenship in a pluralistic manner, to encompass a multitude of linguistic, regional and inter-generational contexts.

In view of recent attempts to appropriate the slogan 'Adivasi Lives Matter' by non-Adivasi social activists, a concerted effort will be needed to ensure that such phenomena as solidarity, as well as pedagogy and justice, may be properly decolonised. In the context of India, a new Adivasi-led and Adivasi-oriented charter for social and educational equality should now be developed and implemented across all regions of India, with the aim of ensuring that future generations of Adivasis will be able to define, defend, and engage the opportunities, resources, histories, power, and knowledge that are all rightfully theirs.

Transcripts

What is Participatory Curriculum Development?

19 May 2021
Sayantan Dasgupta (Jadavpur University) and
Cecilia Rossi (BCLT, UEA)

Keywords:
Translation | **Space**

Preamble: As translation specialists who have implemented overtly 'participatory' approaches to their respective curricula and research methods, each speaker dwells very purposefully on the practicalities of transforming Higher Education. Each and every person (and institution) involved in decolonising the curriculum will at some point have to confront the issue of where and how to make specific pedagogical adjustments or overhauls. The conversation here demonstrates how long-term and dynamic thinking, in respect of minority peoples and languages especially, can provide the necessary impetus for structural and systemic changes that privilege inter-personal collaboration and intercultural knowledge.

Sayantan Dasgupta

I would like to start by suggesting that decolonisation has different dimensions in the UK and in India. There are similarities of course: the similarities lie in the idea itself, and perhaps in the larger objectives. But the differences manifest themselves probably in the idea of the corpus, which might inform 'decolonisation of curriculum'. In the Indian context, for instance, the attempt to decolonise for a long time has probably proceeded along two broad trajectories: 1. To foreground an 'Indian' reality, as manifested in Indian literature, politics, history, art, etc., and 2. To open up to the 'world', beyond the UK. And this has been with a particular reference to, and focus on, the rest of Europe, on the one hand, and what used to be called the Third World, on the other.

The keyword that I have chosen is particularly relevant to the two trajectories, and it is: Translation. And participatory curriculum development seems to hold the key to actuating the potential of translation. Participatory Curriculum Development (PCD) seems to be less of something that is already there, and more of an ideal something that we can aspire to. It basically involves the academic as the fountainhead of curriculum formulation 'from above', with the idea of the academic as someone who is, a priori, in a position to formulate curricula. These are the ideas that one probably jettisons, as one embraces PCD.

PCD really opens up the possibility of the participation of various kinds of stakeholders, in various forms. In the Indian context, given the sheer diversity and quantum of languages, translation is of course of paramount importance to our attempts to construct this corpus, which will help us decolonise our curriculum. But the question which crops up is: How do we translate? Because, in the absence of a well-developed translation industry where there are no trained translators between so many languages, collaborative translation seems to offer one path of promise. And, of course, the moment we talk about collaborative translation, we are led immediately to the idea of participatory curriculum development.

We have been experimenting with collaborative translation for some time now, at Jadavpur University, and I am sharing some of the experiences and questions that have emerged from there. The involvement of experts from different languages and different communities is, of course, at the core of this endeavour. But I also feel that student involvement, from within the classroom, can be a very integral and useful part of this attempt. Actually, we sometimes take for granted the multilingual nature of the classroom that we get in India. We get students from different languages, who bring their own languages into the classroom. Perhaps it is possible to use this as a platform, and to proceed in a way that ensures there is a focus on the skill-development of the students: using the languages that they already know in collective attempts to decolonise the curriculum, whilst expanding the national imaginary to stress the diversity of the Indian language map with a view to questioning and navigating the dominance of the various state languages.

I would like to take up the example of Nepali, very briefly. In India, many people feel that Nepali is a foreign language because it is associated with Nepal. But Nepali is also very much an Indian language. There is a powerful body of Indian literary works, in the Nepali language. There is larger politics of teaching Nepali literature in the plains of Bengal, which is where Jadavpur University is located, given the history of political attrition over statehood that we have seen over the last several decades.

Now, is it possible – and this is a question that we have been asking ourselves – to involve the student in the classroom who has Nepali in the curriculum development process? This is something that we have been trying to do in a very small way, over several University Grants Commission projects involving the Centre of Advanced Study, the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA; National Higher Education Mission), and Universities with Potential for Excellence. This has entailed collaboration with Nepali language experts, to identify a corpus of Indian Nepali literature that can be translated and brought into the curriculum. It has also entailed imparting translation-training to students. It is basically building up a relationship that has a very wide loci, tying in their immediate teachers, community leaders from home, writers and so on.

The idea is not only to produce a corpus of literature-in-translation, but also to go beyond that and create an ecosystem that can sustain this kind of pedagogy in the long term. This is very important: what happens after the curriculum is in place is just as important as bringing this curriculum in. So, what we have seen over the last few years is that we have actually been very lucky. Some of our students have graduated, and they have joined as faculty. And this has enabled them to play a more active role in this process, which means that this has gone forward further. More and more work has been done. One of the things which it has led to is the introduction of Nepali language courses at Jadavpur University.

"Participatory Curriculum Development really opens up the possibility of the participation of various kinds of stakeholders, in various forms. In the Indian context, given the sheer diversity and quantum of languages, translation is of paramount importance to our attempts to construct this corpus, which will help us decolonise our curriculum. … The idea is not only to produce a corpus of literature-in-translation, but also to go beyond that and create an ecosystem that can sustain this kind of pedagogy in the long term."

This is actually almost unthinkable in India, because minority, unscripted, and Scheduled Indian languages are not taught formally in too many places, even in a city like Kolkata. It is relatively easier to find a place to learn Spanish, English, German, French European languages. But it is almost impossible to try to learn an Indian language formally, in an institutional format. Again, that is another space that I think we need to decolonise. This is our experience in this context. This attempt to inculcate participatory curriculum development led us over time to encounter different models, and some of them actually happened as an outcome of our collaboration over a couple of workshops with the British Centre for Literary Translation, at UEA, and the National Centre for Writing, in Norwich.

Cecilia Rossi

You will see that the word I have chosen will create an opportunity for very fruitful links between what I am going to say and what Sayantan has just spoken about. My chosen word is: Space. Space is a word that I have used quite a bit in the last few years in connection with my research work. So, I would like to focus on the different kinds of spaces in which decolonising processes can take place.

In the context of academia, space may mean many things: teaching space or learning space; training space; research space, and so on. In the context of my current research, the space I have in mind – which was also the driving force behind my two projects – is the workshop space. It is interesting that Sayantan has been talking about workshops. This workshop space presupposes dialogue and collaboration: a process of learning that goes both ways, from the workshop participant to the workshop facilitators, and vice versa. It also presupposes mutual respect and inclusivity, and the development of self-confidence both in the participants and the facilitators.

For my Arts and Humanities Research Council research project, part of the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI) – which is a satellite project of the ‘Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community’ project, led by the University of Manchester – I have explored the idea of the literary translation workshop: as a space both personal and collective, open to dialogue and creativity. It is a space aimed at literary translation training, but most importantly the workshop space can be reconceptualised as a place that enables us to challenge long-established hierarchies between source text and target text, between writer and translator.

At the workshops, the translators and writers become the co-creators of the meaning of the text. The workshop also becomes a space for research, where research questions can be formulated from the practice of translation: the workshop facilitates ‘practice’ research. It has enabled me to establish interdisciplinary links between literary translation studies and creative writing, and between translation studies and memory studies. This is something that I am working on at the moment.

In the case of my other current project, funded by the UEA Global Challenges Research Fund, the workshop space is also instrumental. We organised the first international meeting of translators and interpreters representing Latin America’s indigenous and minority languages, in Bogotá in November 2019. This involved the Argentine Association of Translators and Interpreters (AATI; Asociación Argentina de Traductores e Intérpretes, founded in 1982), and its Colombian counterpart – the Colombian Association of Translators (ACTTI; Asociación Colombiana de Traductores, Terminólogos e Intérpretes, founded in 1998) – and also funding from the Swiss organisation, Pro Helvetia, through the Coincidencia Programme (https://prohelvetia.ch/en/initiative/coincidencia/).

This project arose from the recognition that translators and interpreters play a key role in the processes of recovery and dissemination of indigenous languages throughout Latin America, and that their work guarantees access to information and rights, for indigenous communities, as well as the dissemination of their languages and cultures. However, the experience and training of translators and interpreters across the region varies greatly, and this has not been properly accounted for. Colleagues from the National University of General San Martín (UNSAM; Universidad Nacional de General San Martín), and especially my co-investigator Georgina Fraser, have been working on this for a while now.

But the motivation for this project was the recognition of a lack of space, for dialogue and collaboration, between translators and interpreters across the region, and a lack of opportunities for their voices to be heard. And this very much relates to what Ruby Hembrom was talking about last week, and her keyword: Vaani or Voice. A voice can be heard or not heard. And if we as academics, and those responsible for curriculum development, do not create these spaces, then these voices – the voices of indigenous people – are not heard. So, one of the aims of the workshops in Bogotá was to share experience. Each translator or interpreter was given a dedicated space, in which they could present to the group their own experience and, in some cases, the work they do, how they trained to do this work, and what next steps they felt were needed to continue to open up spaces for their own particular languages.

We produced a number of documentaries, and you can watch them on the British Centre for Literary Translation website, under ‘research news’, or on the AATI’s YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnLdWfdpc9AD8PYFKVVibAA/videos). The project then opened up the workshop space, also the training space. We trained the translators at the Bogotá meeting on the use of Audacity (software), and also offered a subtitling workshop. Some of them are now broadcasting on indigenous radio stations. We also opened up the editorial space. In the specific context of Argentina’s indigenous languages, the project also aims to publish three volumes of indigenous writing, in a bilingual format. There is also the social media space. All the proceedings of the meeting in Bogotá were actually live-streamed on the Primer EITILOM Facebook group: Encuentro Internacional de Traductores e Intérpretes de Lenguas Originarias y Minoritarias (First International Meeting of Translators and Interpreters from Indigenous and Minoritised Languages). We also have a WhatsApp group that is continuing to link all of these translators and interpreters.

I would like to end with a question here, talking about space: What spaces (including training and editorial spaces) can we open up to hear different voices, the voices of indigenous people, so that the stories of these marginalised communities can be heard?

“This project arose from the recognition that translators and interpreters play a key role in the processes of recovery and dissemination of indigenous languages throughout Latin America, and that their work guarantees access to information and rights, for indigenous communities, as well as the dissemination of their languages and cultures. … But the motivation for this project was the recognition of a lack of space, for dialogue and collaboration, between translators and interpreters across the region, and a lack of opportunities for their voices to be heard.”

Transcripts

Can and Should Trauma and Victimhood be Taught?

26 May 2021

Rukmini Bhaya Nair (IIT Delhi) and
Tiffany Atkinson (LDC, UEA)

Keywords:
Disaster | **The Other**

Preamble: Participating as poets and literary educators, both speakers have an unrivalled wealth of wisdom and experience with which to unpack this question. Acknowledging the long history of education pertaining to trauma and victimhood, each reflects on the far-reaching ethical implications of attempting to represent the suffering of others. Dwelling on their own personal experiences of encountering trauma, the conversation yields new analytical possibilities through which to understand the ever-evolving processes of articulating, apprehending, and engaging pain, loss and violence. The conversation provides a fascinating glimpse into how and why writers and educators contribute to the evolving processes of 'interweaving' the self, the other, affect, humility, hope and resilience.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair

It turns out that the topic of trauma is especially pertinent today since we are in the grip of a pandemic that has caused and will continue to cause 'trauma' for a long time in the future. I am going to wade now into the vast Red Sea opened up by the question. My initial observation is that these sorts of courses are in fact already being taught the world over: for example, in the USA 'slave narratives' are a case in point; in India, several universities teach courses on the Partition of India, when India and Pakistan were decreed separate countries overnight in the period soon after the British left India. This event resulted in the greatest migration of the 20th century with over 10 million crossing the newly drawn borders in the space of a year or two, and it is also a main node within the broader field of Postcolonial Studies with its emphasis on the silent trauma of the 'subaltern'. More recently the fields of Humility Studies and Human Dignity Studies have emerged, which communities like the Dalits (oppressed, literally 'crushed') have incorporated very powerfully into their discourse.

We have now to recast this question about the transformative value that already existing notions and fields might have more specifically in our attempts to decolonise curricula. This is what one might call the 'pedagogy question'. What methodologies might we use to understand and teach the processes of decolonisation better via concepts such as 'victimhood' and 'trauma'? And should trauma and victimhood be taught in the first place? This defines a moral pairing connected to the pedagogic. Should and can such processes be taught? Such a question inevitably involves the problem of appropriation. Are we not silencing the victim and ventriloquising traumatic experiences should we routinely begin to 'teach' these various experiences in university courses? This leads to a further, perhaps radical, thought: should trauma and victimhood be deliberately developed as concepts that stand 'outside' or 'beside' the university, in order to interrogate the university frames through which we teach decolonisation in the universities?

I chose my keyword 'Disaster' in order to connect with these paired pedagogic and moral questions. Disaster is not in our *Keywords for India* dictionary, partly because we do not really have a formal equivalent for it in most Indian languages , except for words like 'Mahavinash' (in general terms, a great devastation, destruction, or cataclysm). Usually, in English, the word 'disaster' applies to natural phenomena like earthquakes and floods, as well as to epidemics and pandemics. But in India, the concept of disaster does not seem to incorporate the idea of man-made disasters, although in ordinary English usage it covers both man-made and natural disasters. I actually find the capaciousness of the English word 'disaster' quite useful when we start to think of notions like trauma. In my research, I have found that natural disasters and 'acts of god', as well as made-made devastations, are often treated in the same way by postcolonial governments, taking their cue from the bureaucratic and homogenizing ideology of colonial governments. We use the terminology of ex-gratia (gratuitous) payments, compensations, disaster management plans, and so on. Governmental discourse simply has little or no vocabulary or methodology for thinking about either long-term or short-term effects of the psychic damage caused by such traumatic events. This lacuna now needs to be urgently addressed both in terms of pedagogy and ethics, especially post-Covid. That is where universities can play a crucial role.

How does a society address the invisible mental consequences of traumatic events? I am reminded here of a story told to me by a flood victim in Bengal. He said, 'You see, Didi, (elder sister), everything seems fine now. The land appears serene. But do you know that the water from the sea has seeped invisibly into the ground? Nothing will grow properly here for years now, owing to this salty water.'

I remember my father too, who as a young boy lost many members of his family in the Great Bihar earthquake of 1934 so widely recorded by colonial officials. Even after forty years when he was married and has children – I remember this vividly – he would wake up screaming, from nightmares and from the trauma of his experience of earthquakes. I'd like to present this as an example of the invisible intergeneral effect of trauma damage. University courses on disaster can usefully and effectively address this passage of trauma by paying interdisciplinary attention to the 'experiential effects' in diaries, notebooks and personal tapes as well as to literary accounts of disasters, big and small. The human mind finds it difficult to tackle huge numbers, for example the ten thousand people killed in the Bihar earthquake or the ten million killed during the Partition of India and Pakistan. But literary narratives, and the oral testimonies of ordinary people, can take incomprehensible numbers and give them 'a local habitation and a name'. They can humanise history and make trauma comprehensible.

As a thought experiment, we could also perhaps think of the colonial period as a longue durée trauma, with psychological effects that can be reimagined through the fine arts, literature, poetry. These might then serve to illuminate present trauma.

"We have now to recast this question about the transformative value that the already existing notions and fields might have, specifically in attempts to decolonise curricula. This is the pedagogy question. ... There is the invisible damage of trauma, that university courses on disaster can usefully and effectively address. ... Literary narratives, and the oral testimonies of ordinary people, can take incomprehensible numbers and give them a local habitation. They can humanise history and make trauma comprehensible."

I think that it was Mallarmé who called poetry the language of a 'state of crisis'. Poetry emblematises people's imaginative responses to the unimaginable, as was evident in America after 9/11 when local radio stations were flooded with poems, not by poets but by ordinary citizens. The pandemic today is apparently producing a similar affect. People are reacting to it with music, with poetry, and so on to combat its toxic effects.

To my mind, to begin with this role of the arts, as a glass (Hindi: durbin) through which the devastated architecture of history and its inevitable traumas can be explored is a given. Even if it involves 'traditional' ways of thinking, it is communally and communicatively critical, a lens through which a deeper approach to dealing with trauma in a psychological sense outweighs the simple-mindedness of exaggerated political correctness and political sloganeering. This is what's needed – this is where the arts and universities can play a role in connecting decolonisation and trauma.

Tiffany Atkinson

I am coming at this question from the perspective of a teacher of literature, literary theory, poetry, and creative writing. What we are talking about is reading, studying, and writing literature of testimony, of witness, of reparation, of restoration and rehabilitation. This pertains to an increasingly strong contemporary trend for memoir, autobiography, auto-fiction, confessional, and post-confessional. It also describes a reading sensitivity towards silences, gaps, aporias in a text that might point to trauma, and the possibility of a traumatised text. So, clearly these traces of victimhood and trauma in texts open up big questions about the politics of representation, and the relationships between individuals, between power, between language. These expose unequal distributions of power between people, between selves and states, between marginal and mainstream identities, between people and disaster. These have devastating effects on the self, particularly, and on the community.

As Rukmini has said, for some time all of these things have been and should be part of a Humanities education. There are various areas of engagement that one could emphasise: making the invisible visible; emphasising voices that have been silenced or marginalised; generating alternative knowledges; negotiating the limits of the sayable; identifying the responsibilities of the witness. All of these relevant to an institution that is attempting to decolonise its canons, its hierarchies, its structures, and its teaching practices, etc. That is not in any doubt.

So, in response to the question, my inputs pertain to the nitty-gritty of the pedagogical interface. As we already teach these things, we can arrive at a related set of questions: how and to what ends? My keyword, in trying to think this through, is 'The Other'. This was a big critical term in my own education. I am going to try to use 'the other' as a way of thinking through not texts and readers per se, but the encounters that happen, and what we are trying to facilitate in reading and writing literary texts, as opposed to historical and sociological texts. As Rukmini said, these prioritise the experiences of, as well as the psychological effects on, the individual. I want to push back against the bias, which I have experienced in the field of creative writing, that equates 'the individual' with 'the self', and writing with self-determination, self-expression, self-actualisation, self-definition and, perhaps more disparagingly, self-help, self-indulgence, self-exposure, etc.

There is always the fundamental point that the self always requires an other. Writing is always addressed to an other. It requires an other, as much as it requires a self. What am I trying to say? This is the bit I am trying to think through, hopefully with everyone's help today. I am trying to argue for a fundamental disposition towards the other, as much as towards the self, as part of the answer to the main question and, beyond that, towards the aforementioned question of 'how and why' these experiences should be taught. Thinking at the level of the other rather than of the self, first and foremost – that is to say 'the other' with a small O rather than 'the Other' with a big O – might result in better conversations, conversations that change all of us.

I thought of another question. When we read or teach a representative text of trauma and victimhood, what are we actually doing? What do we 'do with' it? I had planned to talk about the university classroom here, but I was suddenly overtaken with a childhood memory, which I hope will animate some of these questions. It was my first encounter with a text that I think we would call a text of victimhood and trauma. When I was about thirteen years, and at school, I read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, as probably every school child in the UK did in the 1980s. Not that I could have put it in these terms then, but I think that my encounter with that book was a problem of slippage, between self and other, or between 'other' with a little O and 'Other' with a big O. Because, on the one hand, Anne was a girl of my age, who was preoccupied with all the kind of things that I recognised. It was 'relatable', in the parlance of today's students. On the other hand, I think that what we were learning was a set of signifiers that, I think, commodified the suffering of others into a kind of absolute otherness. And perhaps this connects with Rukmini's point of concern about what authentic dialogues actually are and even are not, for example as a set of 'correct' responses.

In its own way, that absolute otherness became unwieldy and I still encounter, in students' responses to works of trauma, a similar phenomenon expressed through words like horror, atrocity, unthinkable, unspeakable, unimaginable, indescribable, humbling, shocking. The teacher set us a piece of homework that I think she thought was easy. She asked us to write a letter to Anne, from 1987 or whenever it was to, quite literally, address the other. And it was impossible. I shuttled between these two modes, of identification and alienation, and I could find no way in which to begin that address. We were not furnished with a way of understanding what happens in that interface. There was no way that I could begin that, knowing what I did, in my warm, free, 1987 classroom and what Anne did not, namely the sheer iconicity of her victimhood.

There is a lot more to say about that. But I think that the question here is to do with both reading and writing texts, and inviting our students to write texts. In the context of decolonising the curriculum, which we are feeding back into as an overall concern, it is not really enough just to introduce a text, a record of trauma, or to introduce the possibility of writing trauma, as if to say, 'and this too is a thing that happens, out there or in here'. It may lead to activism or to policy change, or indeed some kind of therapeutic revelation, but that is not our job. Well, it might be eventually! But it is not in the classroom, is it? There is a surplus of work to be done there, and this has to do with the negotiation of otherness, and how those two things – experience and its commoditisation – can be put into conversation, and not left inert, as packages. What is the difference between commodifying the suffering of others, and actually 'bearing witness'? What does that mean, how do we do it, and how do we teach it?

> **"Traces of victimhood and trauma in texts open up big questions about the politics of representation, and the relationships between individuals, between power, between language. These expose unequal distributions of power between people, between selves and states, between marginal and mainstream identities, between people and disaster."**

Transcripts

Are Human Rights Universal (and Have They Ever Been So)?

2 June 2021

Vinay Lal (UCLA) and
Cathie Carmichael (HIS, UEA)

Keywords:
Translation | **Representation**
Human | **Rights** | **Universals**

Preamble: Given the presumed centrality, or at least alignment, of human rights in respect of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, questions need to be asked concerning the qualitative as well as quantitative nature of rights and rights-based discourses. Since their inception as a global public good in the mid-twentieth century, the capacity for human rights policies and rhetoric to be mis-managed has prompted wave after wave of criticism from political scientists and political philosophers. Taking place between two historians of rights, the conversation here generates a series of compelling insights into the changing parameters of rights that can extend beyond the human, to incorporate nature, as well as the need for historical sensitivity towards the writing of human dignity both in to and out of the past.

Cathie Carmichael

Although I am not a specialist on India, I am persuaded by my UEA colleagues – Shinjini Das and Dan Rycroft – that a lot can be learnt from Indian scholars, which is relevant to my own research and teaching. In responding to our overall question, translation is my keyword, but I will digress into ‘representation’, since they are closely linked. In attempting to explain why these keywords, and my examples from Bosnia, help us to understand ‘universal human rights’ and ‘decolonising the curriculum’, I ask for your indulgence.

The colony – and I am using that term perhaps for the first time – that I am studying at the moment is Herzegovina, and this is now part of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It fell, or was pushed, out of the Ottoman empire and into the clutches of the Hapsburg monarchy between 1878 and the First World War. Historians have been a little slow to identify Herzegovina as an Austrian colony, preferring more approximate terms, like protectorate. But if we are to follow Hannah Arendt’s two key principles – for colonial government – of race and bureaucracy, I think that it more than qualifies. Furthermore, the British empire did serve as a model and source of envy, for other Europeans, which gave them moral purpose as they took on so-called backward lands, and I think that Herzegovina came into that category.

So, if we are searching for the universal principles, then empire-building is rarely complex or original, but easily copied. British practices were transmitted through a web of science, including botany, medicine, military science, geology, and archaeology. Herzegovina has several religious traditions which defined ethnic groups: Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam. Hapsburg military and administrative authorities tended to favour divide and rule tactics, or divide, define, and rule. The census taken every decade was a key source, as they were able to know who lived where and what religion they practised with enviable attention to detail. As Dan Rycroft has argued for the Indian census of 1931, the gathering of data coincided with theories about race, indigeneity, and difference. Likewise, Austrian administrators worked with stereotypes of the local people, mostly preconceived, but some invented on the hop. Sigmund Freud visited a garrison doctor in 1898, his friend (the Austrian physician) Alois Pick tagging along with him as he visited patients and with scant regard for medical ethics.

Freud replicated a raft of views about Muslim fatalism. As well as their acceptance of kismet [destiny; fate], Muslims were regarded as colourful dressers, sensuous – and this included frequent references to the harem – lazy, superstitious, but with great cuisine, artisanal products, and domestic interiors. Catholics were seen as too close to the Franciscan order, but more reliably pro-Hapsburg. Orthodox pastoralists and peasants were routinely regarded with deep suspicion, and subject perhaps to even more disdain than Muslims. Typically, they were described as hardy, belligerent, mercurial, deceptively cruel, tall craggy, with soft, melancholy, singing voices. Inevitably disdain went hand-in-hand with discriminations, such as the banning of certain musical instruments and of the Cyrillic alphabet. This went to outright persecution in 1914 under the cover of war.

Among the Herzegovinians themselves, illiteracy was very high. As one Dalmatian officer put it: quasi tutti analfabeti (almost everybody is illiterate). Perhaps this was as high as 96 or 97 per cent among women. The Hapsburg soldiers and administrators were almost all highly literate, and encouraged to keep records, write diaries and letters. So, how can these people who wrote so little down be best represented by historians? How can we rescue the voices of the misrepresented, the subalterns who cannot speak? Some folklorists gathered oral poetry in the nineteenth century, giving fragments of insight. One local ethnographer, Jevto Dedijer, had his personal papers piled up in a bonfire and deliberately burnt during the first months of the First World War. Also, the Orthodox church in Kosijerevo was attacked, and its manuscripts burnt, in 1914.

Those elusive fragments, that might have given us some sense of the voice of the illiterate were often deliberately destroyed. Therefore, the physical obstacles to understanding people in Herzegovina are immense. I rely on those who represented them, and rare surviving fragments of local voices. In other words, I have to translate colonial discourses into viable sources, which runs the risk of sentimentality that often distinguishes strategic essentialisations. I have often relied on those individuals who are not quite true believers: those who expressed inward doubt about the so-called civilising mission. I have found that Hapsburg writers who actually learnt the local language were far more likely to be respectful of local people, although this is not a hard and fast rule.

In a Gandhian sense, I am supposing that in and amidst darkness light persists. Sometimes a move away from written sources also helps. The emerging skill of taking photographs also gives us vivid images of women, in particular, and sometimes in colour. While the effort to decolonise the curriculum promises to rescue the past in some of its complexity – to restore dignity, if not rights, to the silenced and oppressed – the voices of the colonisers are still one hundred times stronger. For a historian interested in the universal and human rights, this is a massive if not insuperable obstacle.

> **“While the effort to decolonise the curriculum promises to rescue the past in some of its complexity – to restore dignity, if not rights, to the silenced and oppressed – the voices of the colonisers are still one hundred times stronger. For a historian interested in the universal and human rights, this is a massive if not insuperable obstacle.”**

Vinay Lal

Let me get straight away to a couple of propositions that I want to put forward. These are meant by way of a provocation. Because the three key terms, in a sense, in the very title – human, rights, universal – are all of course, if I may put it this way, ‘borrowed’ from the key document of our times: the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, passed shortly after the end of the Second World War, in 1948.

I think that we have to begin with the recognition that we are living in an era of what we might call ‘rights talk’. We all talk about rights. There has been something that we can call a provisional yet international human rights movement. So, the first problem that I really want to look at is the problem of the universal, because there is an obvious objection that one has immediately to this idea of the universal: since the beginning of the idea of human rights in the modern sense, going back traditionally in the scholarship to the French Revolution, it has been understood that rights were never universal, and that there were people who were obviously excluded. That is the most obvious point that people will generally make.

“In raising these questions, I am suggesting that there are difficulties actually present in the conception of rights. Some of the difficulties have to do with the increasing ambit of rights. And as we draw in a larger and ever increasing portion of humanity, it seems to me that the opportunities for oppression also increase correspondingly. … So, my submission is that there are a great many reasons why we must really engage in what we might call a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ regarding the conception of the universal itself.”

Contrary to that, and on the question of whether human rights are universal, some will argue that rights can ‘become’ universal: as an ever increasing portion of humanity has been drawn under the ambit of human rights. In the beginning rights were conferred on white men, or white men with property. They were not extended to white men without property, to Black people, to Jews, to Women, and so on. We understand the point that, in view of the connection in the language of ‘rights’, between early forms of ‘democracy’ and later forms of ‘human’ rights, we cannot escape the fact that the origins of human rights were clouded in discriminations.

There is another sense in which we can read the universal: that the initial concept was what we might describe as a political concept [of international democracy] and that gradually the ambit of that concept began to increase as well. So, we began to speak not only of the right to life and livelihood, and the right to property, but also of the right to freedom of speech and expression, the right to religious belief, the right to schooling, the right to healthcare, and the right to – what is now increasingly being described as – clean air and water, and so on. Here are a number of complications that we can really think about. So, for example, one of the things that the French Revolution did mention was the right to work. This is not often remembered. Among the documents that came out of the French Revolution, including of course the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, this speaks about the right to work.

Now, if we increase the scope and the ambit of these rights, can we also speak about the right to not work? Do we have a right to not work? This becomes very critically important because there are people who might choose not to work, and then of course the question would be: does humanity have an obligation to sustain them? […]

In raising these questions, I am suggesting that there are difficulties actually present in the concept of rights. Some of the difficulties have to do with the increasing ambit of rights. And as we draw in a larger and ever increasing portion of humanity, it seems to me that the opportunities for oppression also increase correspondingly. Let us not forget what Hannah Arendt had written in her book *On Revolution*, 1963. I quote, ‘Pity, taken as the spring of virtue, has proved itself to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself.’ So, my submission is that there are a great many reasons why we must really engage in what we might call a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ regarding the conception of the universal itself.

There are a great many other things that we could add here. When we speak about universal human rights, are we therefore also invoking automatically the concept of humanitarian intervention? We know that this has been the subject of debate, conducted over the past twenty to thirty years in a more protracted fashion that it was in the 1950s and 60s. Although, even at that time, that idea was very much present. It grew out of the Nuremberg Principles concerning the definition of war crimes, created by the International Law Commission of the United Nations. But it also grew out of such things, which are now largely forgotten, as the efforts – by key African-American leaders and thinkers, such as W.E.B. de Bois, Paul Leroy Robeson and many others – to internationalise the struggle of the African-American and invite international and communitarian interventions in the affairs of the United States.

The United States is, of course, a country that claims a sovereign right to intervene elsewhere but would not countenance or tolerate the idea of such a thing happening with itself. So, once we go down that road, we have to think about a great many other questions, such as: What is the relationship between nationalism and universalism? Does nationalism always put a brake on this ever-expanding ambit of human rights? But let me just go back, and offer another series of provocations. That process has to do with our thinking on this main question. The first thing we have to do is to question this notion of the human, when we speak about human rights.

As the idea of climate change begins to take hold of our imagination – in a manner that it has not yet done so, partly because for many people it still appears as an abstraction – we would become aware of the fact that the very founding original document, namely the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, which is usually taught as a great advance, is also a document that sets us back. And this is partly what Walter Benjamin meant, when he said: ‘there is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism’. Because that document offered a platform, an indication for the human to extend its dominion over nature. So, how would we begin to speak, for example, of the rights of rivers? There are courts in New Zealand and in India that, in 2017, have actually passed judgement saying that rivers have rights, right? There is a wonderful and extraordinary book by Steve Vanderheiden, entitled *Atmospheric Justice: A Political Theory of Climate Change*, from 2008 and it asks: What claim does the atmosphere have over us? So, I think that that is another direction in which we could go. But I’ll stop there.

Transcripts

What Freedoms are Anticipated by Theatres of the Oppressed?

9 June 2021
Sanjoy Ganguly (Jana Sanskriti) and
Ralph Yarrow (LDC, UEA)

Keywords:
Theatre of the Oppressed | **Tradition** |
Understanding | **Spect-activism**

Preamble: If higher education is going to become fully transformative, in the ways anticipated by diverse decolonisation agendas, it will be interesting to test the extent to which it empowers those facets of society who are – in the terminology of the United Nations 2030 Agenda – routinely 'left behind' as a direct consequence of entrenched ethnic, economic, educational, and gender-based divisions. As exponents of the Theatre of the Oppressed movement, which has developed a global track-record of inspiring social change through participatory cultural practices, each speaker reflects on how and why crossovers can and should be cultivated between performance-oriented, indigenous, and progressive pedagogies.

Ralph Yarrow

I hope that we can focus our talk around a practice. Sanjoy very much is an artistic director of a practice of theatre, a practice that engages directly in the social and political realities of people's lives. So, although there are enormous numbers of very fascinating ideas and concepts, which underly this – and his thinking has been profound in those areas – these things are translated into real-life actions, and indeed into real-life activity. For my keyword, I am going to take the phrase Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). It might be helpful to say something briefly about what the theatre of the oppressed is, and what its principal modes of delivery are, and then let Sanjoy explain how that relates to the work that he does in West Bengal (in eastern India).

Theatre of the Oppressed was originated – invented, compiled – by Augusto Boal (1931-2009) in the 1970s in Latin America. It is a theatre practice that aims at enabling marginalised, disadvantaged, and oppressed groups and communities to analyse and confront the conditions that they experience. I will just read you a bit from the *Routledge Companion to the Theatre of the Oppressed*, which came out last year. 'We believe that, more than just a set of techniques, TO is a certain kind of attention to reality: a specific frame for political analysis and expression. Boal articulated TO with the belief that all people are artists: 'Everyone can do theatre, even actors!', Boal said.'

Boal argued for theatrical forms that refused what he believed were hierarchical divisions between audience and actor. He opposed divisions between those who listen and those who speak, between those who watch and those who act. Such divisions were reproducing, in the sphere of theatre, the broader divisions of society. And Boal believed that audiences could no longer accept being merely spectators of their lives. He invited them to stop being spectators, which was a relatively passive role, and to become 'spect-actors' and to intervene in the plays and situations which were presented to them.

So, that is the overall focus of TO. The key methodology – that, I think, we will be referring to quite a lot – is what was called forum theatre. Forum theatre is a process which invites audience members to reflect on the performance they are seeing, to evaluate how accurate it is as a representation of their reality, to decide how they feel about its outcome, and then crucially to begin to understand and analyse the structural causes of the situation, which is usually or almost always a negative situation, of oppression: whether that be social, or inter-personal, or economic, or political.

So, the short play is initially presented to them, which culminates in a crisis. The play is then arrested, stopped, and redone so that the audience get a chance to re-engage with it: being invited not only to reflect, analyse and critique it, but also to come on stage and embody, as well as verbalise, alternative choices at key moments in the action. They then become 'spect-actors' and not merely spectators. Whilst this is going on, the other actors who are on the stage, and have been playing the roles of the characters in the situation, do not simply remain there in neutral but they actually continue to play the roles of the other interested parties. So, they stick to their script, which represents normally exploitative and entrenched positions – political, social, traditional – so that a conflict is engendered. The 'spect-actors' who come on stage have to struggle against the situation in which they find themselves.

So, the 'spect-actors' come on, and the scene is developed in relation to the intervention, which the 'spect-actors' have presented. And that goes on for a certain amount of time, until it has gone as far as it can, and then people are invited to come on and pursue that line of argument or action, or another line of argument or action. Each intervention is pursued and problematised, as far as possible. It is not a question of trying to solve the issue. But it is a question of trying to find out what the constituents of the issue are, and what possible tracks might be taken through it or out of it, and then to evaluate those, to see what is happening.

So, the whole thing is a kind of ongoing, collaborative debate between the actors on stage and the audience. This is facilitated by a person known as the 'joker' who, essentially, is a kind of referee of the game that is going on, as Sanjoy has actually described it in his book, *From Boal to Jana Sanskriti: Practice and Principles* (2017). So, he is not a player. Rather, he is trying to make that link between the audience and the actors, and to highlight the situations that are being problematised and developed in the interactive section of the work that is going on at the time. Each intervention is pursued until it is clear that it cannot go any further, and then it is suspended by the joker. And then, at the end of the session, people start to engage further with all of the situations and interventions that have been presented, and take those forward.

Ideally then, this also leads not merely to having an interesting intellectual evening or discussion, which is extended by the fact that some members of the audience will have actually physically, as well as mentally and intellectually, engaged with the situations that they are discussing. But it also, ideally, leads to a decision about what kinds of action might be taken in the group or community, in order to address the situation which the play has presented. So, there is a concluding discussion, which assesses the merits of those interventions.

So, this is forum theatre. It is, essentially, based around a notion of Platonic dialogue, if you like, or interchange and of pursuing the relationship of different strategies and possibilities in a public space, as an act of public engagement with – an intervention in – the realities of the situation in which the audience finds itself. Ideally the plays in forum theatre, and in theatre of the oppressed, are not simply parachuted in from outside, having been written or conceived by people from outside. They are plays which have been developed by and with the community itself, in order to reflect the realities of their life.

This, essentially, is the basis of TO, and forum theatre. It is in many countries around the world. It has been used to intervene in, and engage with, a huge range of problems: women's rights, human rights, political oppression, educational provision, and all sorts of other things. The most famous group in Britain is Cardboard Citizens, which has been working for twenty or thirty years with the homeless, in London, pursuing things about the rights of homeless people, and whether they can engage with the authorities. In some cases, there have been groups which have gone on for very many years. In other cases, there are groups which arise in order to deal with particular, specific, political and historical locations and circumstances. TO has, at various times, been practised in around eighty countries throughout the world. I am going then to ask Sanjoy to fill in a little bit about what Jana Sanskriti's (or, Culture for the People) role is, in West Bengal (eastern India). Jana Sanskriti is the largest TO operation in India. In some sense it is the largest TO operation in the world. It is certainly the longest-lasting TO operation in the world, and engages with particular kinds of communities and particular kinds of situations.

Of all the things that it implies, the key point is that there should be an effect: that it is there in order to do things. It is there in order to change situations. It is there in order to enable people to engage with the situation – the realities in which they live – critically and productively. In these terms, we must go on to look at how Jana Sanskriti uses TO and other means to work with communities over a long period of time: to explore some of the implications of their methods, especially in terms of long-term learning.

"Each intervention is pursued and problematised, as far as possible. It is not a question of trying to solve the issue. But it is a question of trying to find out what the constituents of the issue are, and what possible tracks might be taken through it or out of it, and then to evaluate those, to see what is happening. ... It also, ideally, leads to a decision about what kinds of action might be taken in the group or community, in order to address the situation which the play has presented."

Sanjoy Ganguly

Ralph, you have clearly articulated the dramaturgy of the theatre. As opposed to propaganda, it extends the intellectual space to the spectators, so they can engage in a dialogue with the actors. It becomes a space to develop an intellectual understanding on issues. I am coming to this in particular, because it has got a direct connection with freedom. It frees us from the inferiority imposed on us, normally on the people who think that they are incapable of thinking. This is very important, and I will come that.

Before I go into that, and since this is a *Dialogue on Decolonisation*, we must say that freedom is one of the very important aspects, as decolonisation means a kind of freedom. Being part of a party where most of the leaders were trained by the Communist Party of Great Britain, and became the central committee leaders, we can think of decolonisation at different levels. Also, to a large extent, we have experienced other forms of colonisation: let us say Soviet colonisation, or something like that. We were not really encouraged to look at our history, culture, or philosophy. Just by not paying any attention to it, we rejected it. So, in the Communist Party of India (Marxist), our orientation was 'reject blindly, accept blindly'. This culture alienated us from our own philosophies and ideas. There was also a very dialectical progression of Indian thinking, which we were not very aware of.

But when I went to the village, as a resolution to the party, I felt as if I was in a religious institution. I mention this because it has got quite a direct connection to how decolonisation works in our practice of politics. In temples you have gods. In our party office there used to be gods: their photographs were hung there. Those gods (the party leaders) are beyond any criticism. You cannot criticise them. So, whatever comes from the top, from the committee, you have to treat those documents as divine. So, we were only asked to listen, to watch. We were only asked to carry out the orders that came from the top. It was a perfect culture of monologue that I experienced in the party, as well as what I am calling a kind of religiosity, where you cannot criticise your leaders.

So, I felt very oppressed. I was looking for a dialogic space. So, for some reason I went to the villages. And when I went to the villages, I found the people practised traditional art. Because in the early 1980s there were still some vibrant practices of traditional art in the villages. In Kolkata (then Calcutta), we did not see it in the early 1980s. Because Calcutta was the British capital till around 1910, and the University of Calcutta was established just after the mutiny in 1857. In Kolkata, there was hardly any sign of traditional art. We did not see it in our early years. So, when I went to the villages, I discovered a break in the traditional art forms. In traditional theatre, all the characters appeared as very complex characters: they were not simple. So, I understood that there was no binary: there was no either or, and each character was very complex, so I could not really empathise with any particular character.

I realised that these traditional artists wanted to make people social critics. And I had no idea about this aspect of our tradition. My idea of the tradition was just the opposite, which was also true. But this is also true: that there is another stream which wants to make people social critics. So, I was quite convinced by this idea of making people social critics through theatre and traditional art. So, I decided to learn the traditional. Because I knew that I could not talk about politics unless I became acceptable to those also carrying this tradition and unless I understand the village and their perceptions, their perspective of life, their philosophy of life. My idea was that they can only be the blind followers, that they can only walk behind us. So, instead of making people blind followers, we wanted to make people social critics.

While learning traditional art, I discovered that theatre of the oppressed pertained to me: because this theatre is introspection. I will come to it later: this theatre is also an introspective act. It is not just 'we understand the society around us', but 'we also understand ourselves'. It is a journey from knowing to understanding.

Since I left the Communist Party, feeling very oppressed by this culture of monologue, I had a problem accepting the propaganda here. And in our country, outside theatre or 'proscenium theatre' was mainly 'propaganda theatre': 'street theatre' they used to call it. I drew inspiration from the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA), which was founded in 1943, and to me the IPTA went through a golden age from 1943 to 1952. In 1952 the Communist Party participated in the parliamentary election, and they established huge control, so a lot of people started leaving.

Even then, I did not want to suffer what Boal used to call 'Che Guevara syndrome'. I did not want to be a producer of cries to machine guns. We always admired Che Guevara's honesty, tenderness, and bravery, but I did not like the attitude of going to every place to try to liberate the people, without understanding whether people are ready or not. So, I was not very happy with the propaganda art. Because I was living in the villages, and I was coming across their philosophical wisdoms – they use proverbs and short stories that, in Bengali or Indian philosophy, we call *damsha*, which actually solves a lot of conflicts, in philosophy and ideas – I became convinced that every individual is essentially intellectual.

These villagers are intellectuals, but they do not know about it. They are not aware of their intellectual selves, because they were the victim of monologues, for ages. And now they think that they are incapable of it. This is a construction. I felt the need for a theatre, which can break this construction. At this point of time, I met my teacher, Augusto Boal and I explained my problem. I said, 'by doing propaganda I feel that I am violating human rights'. So, he actually taught me about the Theatre of the Oppressed, and we were the first exponent in India. And after that, when I started practising the

"I felt very oppressed. I was looking for a dialogic space. ... I was quite convinced by this idea of making people social critics through theatre and traditional art. ... While learning traditional art, I discovered that theatre of the oppressed pertained to me: because this theatre is introspection. It is not just 'we understand the society around us', but 'we also understand ourselves'. It is a journey from knowing to understanding."

Theatre of the Oppressed, I realised that this theatre actually is, in a way, very liberating I think, in three senses.

The first thing is that people think that we are not capable of it, so it breaks that construction. First of all, when we script a play – instead of playing the script – we use games and exercises as social vocabularies. So, we improvise these exercises as social metaphors. When the actors play the games and exercises, they can examine the tiny elements of their reality. They can examine their reality. They can observe their reality: from reality they bring stories. This is a process that makes everyone a playwright, and also extends an opportunity for the participants to become a director of it. I am not saying that the director has no role. But actors, by and large, can also enjoy being the director.

For example, if we are performing a scene of domestic violence, it appears to the spectators initially as a problem between a man and a women. But later on, they would understand how patriarchy is acting as an ideology in our society, and how patriarchy is internalised, even within the woman. They discover this construction, so they feel the inspiration to break that construction: the internalised patriarchal values that people have. So, they want to come out if it. This is an aspect of liberation, because they undertake an intellectual journey, for example from domestic violence to the understanding of patriarchy.

This is a journey from the effect to the cause, from the result to the reason. It is basically an intellectual evolution that they experience. It is also an aesthetic in our theatre. Here, aesthetic is an art of evolving: aesthetic as an art of learning. So, it actually liberates. We script intellectual power on stage. That intellectual power breaks the passivity. So, actors and spectators act outside the stage, as activists. I call this 'spect-activism'. Boal calls this 'spect-actor'. Through this interaction between 'spect-actors' and actors we script intellectual power, which breaks passivity to inspire people to act in their real lives. So, they become 'spect-actors' ... The human self finds ways to fight against the oppressive self. From a dehumanised personality, one can become humanised.

Transcripts

Can Culture be Decolonised?

16 June 2021
Sona Datta (curator) and
Rosinka Chaudhuri (CSSSC)

Keywords:
Authenticity | **Nostalgia, Responsibility**

Preamble: Given the vastness and the ambiguity of this leading question, both participants aim to broach it in terms of their own areas of professional and intellectual expertise. The conversation raises important points concerning the long and chequered history that characterises the relationship between art, culture and politics in colonial and post-colonial domains. It is marked by a willingness not only to question, but also to aim to resolve, the assumptions and prejudices that are present in many different areas of scholarly and curatorial practice. The conversation teases out a number of historical and contemporary issues concerning artistic and institutional spaces, tropes, responsibilities and ethics. The 'textured' nature of cultural interpretation, and of related artistic categories and experiences, therefore acquires real clarity.

Rosinka Chaudhuri

We had a wonderful chat, Sona and I, in the prelude to what we would be discussing today, on how we would want to approach it. One of the first things that we both agreed on was that, when one thinks of a question as vast at this, you realise immediately that it is a question that we can approach from many different directions. Our paths would be determined, in the end, both by our areas of expertise and crucially by our location in the world. My own work lies at the intersection of literature and history, and I have worked extensively on poetry, history, and the nineteenth century cultural sphere, which would determine my answer to the question and what we mean when we ask that question.

So, let us consider the 'location' of culture first, without recourse to Homi K. Bhabha, but quite simply. So, when you ask this question – can culture be decolonised? – in formerly imperial countries, like Britain or France, or in countries with a deep history of slavery, like the US, the political charge of movements, like Black Lives Matter, or Rhodes Must Fall, will inevitably colour your perception. 'Decolonising' your culture then may mean variously tearing down statues, or changing the curriculum. Or, it may mean to be able to understand – like the art critic Holland Cotter did in the *New York Times* in 2008, reviewing a show called The Art of Nandalal Bose – that we need to stop thinking of modernity as having happened exclusively in the West.

As he says, and I am quoting him, 'Modernism wasn't a purely western product sent out like so many care packages to a hungry and waiting world. It was a phenomenon that unfolded everywhere in different forms, at different speeds, for different reasons, under different pressures, but always under pressure. As cool and above it all as modern may sound, it was a response to emergency. In India the emergency was bruising colonialism that had become as intolerable to artists as to everyone else.'

So, what Cotter was doing here was alerting his American readers to something he knew that they did not know, or he presumed they did not know: that the Indian modern had already been produced – in art, literature, and performance – in an astonishing explosion of creativity in the cultural sphere, that the rest of the world was mostly ignorant about. He concluded his review with a sentiment that I, for one, am in total agreement with that 'every museum of modern art in the United States and Europe should be required, in the spirit of truth and advertising, to change its name to Museum of Western Modernism until it has earned the right to do otherwise.'

So, decolonising culture, we can see, was at the top of his agenda. But I am not located in the UK or the US, so what does it mean when you ask our question as an Indian, I wondered? This brought me to my area of research, where I have struggled with the categories used by social scientists and historians. Following hegemonic Left ideology here in India, in academic discourse they have used terms such as 'colonial modern', for instance, to indicate the deep impress of colonisation on the colonised in India, tainting the 'Indian modern' thereby with a whiff of culpability: a suggestion that all that was produced under colonial rule was somehow inauthentic, because it was enabled by colonial structures of education and thought.

"My counter-question therefore, in the context of Indian cultural production in the colonial era would be rather: can culture be colonised? I could see, just as the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873) did, that because you brought the sonnet form into the practice of Bengali poetry you were not colonised culturally, which critics said he was. Funnily enough, when Picasso takes from African art, no one calls him colonised."

Authenticity, then, I thought would be my keyword. This is because I could see that authenticity was a preoccupation not only in comparatively recent academic discourse – thus the question about the 'derivative discourses' of nationalism in India, as asked by Partha Chatterjee for instance, but also and perhaps unsurprisingly in the arena of the Indian literary sphere as it exists till today.

I could see that an identarian or political or nationalist focus reduced the modern Indian cultural sphere and misunderstood its achievement. My counter-question therefore, in the context of Indian cultural production in the colonial era would be rather: can culture be colonised? I could see, just as the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873) did, that because you brought the sonnet form into the practice of Bengali poetry you were not colonised culturally, which critics said he was. Funnily enough, when Picasso takes from African art, no one calls him colonised.

So, a preoccupation with our own, versus the foreign: this is something that I wanted to address. When critics in the colonial era made a criticism like that, it was understandable as they were concerned with decolonising their minds from the grip of a colonial imposition of taste. The attempt was there in Bengal, as well as in Ireland, to shore up a national literature. That attempt meant a return to authenticity and roots, among some of the colonised. Though I would still like to point out that writers and artists themselves took what they liked, from where they liked.

But today, the current obsession with a form of authenticity in the world – as it exists today for instance in Trump's putting America first, or in Erdogan or Modi's insistence on the dominance of one cultural identity or religion over a plural, secular and heterogenous society – is, I think, unacceptable and dangerous. So, in these locations where we are, whether in Turkey or in India, culture then needs to be decolonised from the grip of a demand for authenticity and homogeneity. It needs to be decolonised from the insistence on the superiority of one language, one religion, or one cultural identity over a plural, cosmopolitan and tolerant one.

Sona Datta

I am going to start with a painting. There is a painting by an Indian modernist called M.F. (Maqbool Fida) Husain in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, Massachusetts, which incidentally is a small town of 40,000 people but holds the most important collection of modern twentieth-century Indian painting in any museum outside India. Husain's 'Man', painted in 1952, has a central figure in the middle of the painting. This figure sits like Rodin's 'Thinker'. In the centre of this work are both 'the artist' and 'the citizen' in newly independent India, cast amidst a bricolage of India's history. This enigmatic and chaotic assemblage is an expression of postcolonial life. His large green eye observes the bewildering swirl of opposing forces – ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, hopeful and anxious, powerful and vulnerable, chaotic and creative – that surrounded the artist-intellectual in post-independence India.

So, South Asia's shared cultural heritage has continually resisted erasure, despite the incredible burden placed upon it by its new borders, post-1947. The experience of political rupture, of belonging and suddenly not belonging, and the enduring human need to create, in spite of political revision and truncation, is universal. Now, as someone of Indian origin who has grown up in Britain, and cut my curatorial teeth at that great institution of collecting – the British Museum – I would like to touch now on the persistent nostalgia that still feeds the upper echelons of too many great institutions: their directors, their boards, their patrons and their purses, all looking to the clarion cry of curatorial authority [and legitimacy]. In this scenario, the West and the Rest will remain forever caught in an unequal game of development. Colonialism happened. But to what extent are we still colonised? I would argue that decolonisation is as much about the mind, as it is about policy and practice.

So, to extend Rosinka's word – of Authenticity – I would urge you to think about Texture. I would like to quote Dan Hicks, from his brilliant article in *The Guardian*, on 7th May 2021, 'Righting wrongs … for museums demands a new openness to transformation, driven by equitable partnerships with the audiences, stakeholders and communities that museums serve, and from whom they serve social legitimacy. At present, the gap between London's largest museums and those people with the closest ties to world culture collections, both internationally and in the city, is widening.' To this, I would add an urgent appraisal of the widening gap also, between robust debates within the largely hermetically sealed salons of academia (perhaps like this one) and those of the more necessarily charged public spaces, where the weight and burden of accountability beleaguers, if not disrupts, the pace and possibility of change.

If we are constantly talking about the centre and the periphery, then how do we propel a meaningful shift whether in the relations of power, the possibility of a more equitable culture, or the forcefulness of ideas? I have spent much of my career trying to challenge the grand narrative of modernism that sits at the high temple of MOMA. But today, I wonder whether we should perhaps look less to these behemoths for change, and remember our own agency as citizens. Go to the Peabody Essex Museum, just twenty minutes outside Boston. This is perhaps the most important museum in America that Europeans have never heard of! The port of Salem was the place from which America had its first contacts with China and India, back in the 1780s. To join this incredible club of sea-captains you had to have sailed around

"I would like to touch now on the persistent nostalgia that still feeds the upper echelons of too many great institutions. … Colonialism happened. But to what extent are we still colonised? I would argue that decolonisation is as much about the mind, as it is about policy and practice. … The burden and responsibility of institutions, such as the British Museum or the Victoria and Albert Museum, is that they carry a national narrative if not an international one, where nostalgia for empire still lurks in every boardroom and colours every cheque from the Chancellor."

two of the Capes. This was a time when to go to Boston once in your life was an event. This is a museum of exchange and trade and ideas. There are many treasures waiting to be revealed there.

So, transplanting the national (and the political) with the civic (and the cosmopolitan) spaces is perhaps what I am getting to: spaces that are lived and loved by those who used them. The burden and responsibility of institutions, such as the British Museum or the Victoria and Albert Museum, is that they carry a national narrative if not an international one, where nostalgia for empire still lurks in every boardroom and colours every cheque from the Chancellor.

So, how do we respond to the Art Council England's investment principles, including 'inclusivity and relevance', if today Tate feels the need to close its restaurant because someone noticed a black slave in Rex Whistler's powerful mural, 'The Expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats' (1926), and missed the point about its critique of empire entirely focusing instead on the stereotypical and 'offensive' depictions? We cannot cancel colonialism by removing statues or hiding murals. If Colston's statue and Rex Whistler's mural become contested sites, then these are also sites and moments for greater dialogue, exchange, and change. So, reflecting on authenticity, I am not BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic), I am just British. There is a difference between being right, and the truth, and the latter is something that you cannot curate.

Transcripts

Should the Political Philosophy of the Indian State Feature in Contemporary Dialogues on Decolonisation?

23 June 2021
Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach (Free University)
and **Amb. Asoke Mukerji**

Keywords:
Civic Nation | **Social Imaginary** | **Democratisation** | **Equality of Participation**

Preamble: Involving a world philosopher and former United Nations diplomat, this dialogue focuses on questions of national and global citizenship to develop an important consensus on the question at hand. It seems that the political philosophies of national decolonisation should feature, and do so to unsettle those educational practices that either ignore, under-utilise, or misrepresent their particular vision, whether in the disciplines of history or sociology, or in international relations. In view of the fact that many early- to mid-twentieth century Indian philosophies of culture, society, humanity, justice and decolonisation have been either sidelined or rejected, usually at the expense of Western norms, special efforts can be made: less with a view to rehabilitating earlier ideas, more with a view to understanding how and why conceptual pluralism matters in social, political and pedagogic contexts oriented towards reform.

Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach

My answer to today's main question is: 'Yes'. I have in mind Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's understanding of a civic nation. This was his blueprint for building up an independent Indian state for a multicultural and multi-religious polity. Ambedkar's starting point was his observation that India had yet to develop a notion of a nation. There was, simply, an amorphous mass of citizens on the subcontinent. According to his observation, there were no preexisiting commonalities. He knew this from his experience as a Mahar (Dalit, or Oppressed; now a Scheduled Caste), and all of the religious, social and also political discrimination that he faced. He also thought that there was no commitment to substantive principles. On the other hand, to have an independent state you needed something that held this pluralistic polity together. He believed that borrowing preexisting notions of a nation from Europe would not do, simply because the Indian situation was so different. So, to bridge that gap, he came up with this understanding of a civic nation.

What was a 'civic' nation, to him? It was a group of people who pursue similar socio-political goals, within a state-like organisation. The sense of collectivity as a group, was not preexistent: it was to be developed through time. It would be developed by citizen participation in common endeavours. Note that as soon as we arrive at this understanding of a civic nation, it is a normative understanding. It is not a description of what is happening on the ground. Very interestingly here, he believed that the Indian state should confer rights on its citizens, not on the basis of preexisting criteria, like religion, ethnicity, or whatever, but for the purposes of creating a group that would then pursue these goals together. For this, the state would have to confer equal rights on its citizens, meaning that it would have to create the necessary material condition for social equality to emerge.

We can look at what he was doing and saying from another perspective. You can say that for Dr Ambedkar, the Indian social imaginary lacks the notion of a nation. But this was needed in order to sustain India's political independence. What do you do? The state could tweak that social imaginary by implanting the notion of a civic nation in that imaginary. Ambedkar was aware of the fact that this top-down effort would not work out. According to him, the call for democracy by Indians was a 'top dressing', because 'the soil of India is essentially undemocratic' given the lack of a commonality that I mentioned. The other prong of his approach was that society would work together with the state, so that in the long term a constitutional morality would be made through common endeavours.

So, what does this have to do with the *Dialogues on Decolonisation*, especially if we are to have an intellectual decolonisation in universities today? Scholarship, in my observation, continues to be Eurocentric throughout the whole world. This means that entangled histories, of polities like India, are not understood in all their facets. If you are studying a polity like India, scholarship is still derivative. Concepts are related back to Eurocentric theory. This is something that Ambedkar called out too. For me, Ambedkar was a precursor in the international debates on intellectual decolonisation. In view of his understanding of the civic nation, he took a concept, remade it for the Indian situation, and hoped that it would work. This has more to do with decolonisation than with the intellectual mooring of concepts, which is what standard or conventional scholarship says about countries like India. So, we need to re-couple the idea of the political with the practice of politics, and thereby re-establish clearer links between the philosophy or idea of decolonisation and the social and political realities that Ambedkar was both negotiating and pursuing.

> **"Scholarship, in my observation, continues to be Eurocentric throughout the whole world. This means that entangled histories, of polities like India, are not understood in all their facets. … This is something that Ambedkar called out too. For me, Ambedkar was a precursor in the international debates on intellectual decolonisation."**

Asoke Mukerji

That was a very interesting introduction, and I would like to add a perspective that I have been researching and writing about in the last few years. Seeing India in the international landscape, and so far as our discussion on decolonisation is concerned, 1919-20 was a real watershed moment. I agree that we must feature the political philosophy of the Indian state in these dialogues, because there is very little focus on India as a legal entity. In the domain of international relations, this shift happened when India signed the *Treaty of Versailles* on 28th June 1919. Scholars of international law call this an anomaly, however, it made India an equal partner in legal terms in the developments that happened in international relations from 1919 onwards. I think that this is something that is linked to our study of colonialism and subsequently decolonisation.

Not much is taught or written about regarding India's activities as an independent entity in international affairs, for example in the International Labour Organisation. Most people do not know that, since 1922, India has been among the ten permanent members of the governing council of the International Labour Organisation. India has actually used her presence in the ILO to bring into India, in a phased manner, labour standards to protect her workers, including women and children who are working in industrial and agricultural sectors. This is something that needs to be understood, and to be talked about. When we start doing this, we also have to recognise that as a state, as a modern nation-state, India's activity goes back a century. That fact is completely missing.

The second point is that, from my perspective, the creation of an Indian imprint in international affairs has been brought together by our experience of the freedom movement. I agree with Monika's points about Ambedkar and his perception on how the Indian population had to be given a sense of a civic nation. At the same time, I would add that the dominant contributions of Indian political figures, like Mahatma Gandhi, who actually based his politics on experience should be directly taken into account. Gandhi got his experience in South Africa, for example, which brought into politics the entire principle of non-discrimination on the basis of colour, not only into India but also into international relations. And remember that since then we have also witnessed the anti-apartheid movement, which went on to 1994 and was spearheaded in the beginning by India.

Also, there were figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, who had, through his *Glimpses of World History*, a very broad awareness. They were not alone. There were two important intellectuals at that time, before the creation of the United Nations. Rabindranath Tagore's writings reveal a huge awareness of an international framework, in which he positions India. And secondly, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, whose contribution culminated in India's participation in the creation of UNESCO in 1946. I think that these are seminal contributions, which unfortunately we do not talk about, or have much time for. So, generations to come will not have these figures in their curriculum. They will therefore not be looked at, as fonts of the Indian state. Without this, I would argue that we cannot approach the concept of decolonisation, which in political terms after India's independence accelerated very fast. Between 1947 and 1960, the United Nations succeeded in adopting the historic *Decolonisation Resolution*, in September 1960. This democratised international relations by enabling all the former colonial countries to enter the United Nations General Assembly as equal partners.

My keywords in this dialogue have been democratisation, and equality of participation. These are two very important concepts. We need to focus on them with this perspective, and make them the foundations on which we can construct the dialogue on postcolonial India, and on what will happen not only within India, but also in international affairs.

> **"The creation of an Indian imprint in international affairs has been brought together by our experience of the freedom movement. …**
> **I think that these are seminal contributions, which unfortunately we do not talk about, or have much time for. … Without this, I would argue that we cannot approach the concept of decolonisation."**

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About the India Dialogue

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The University’s India Dialogue was inaugurated in 2015 with two key priorities. First, by involving representatives from its many different Schools during an initial consultation, it sought to identify and strengthen areas of academic cooperation and exchange, in view of the University’s overall strategy to become better known and better understood in South Asia. Second, by establishing both formal and informal relationships with numerous universities and departments in India, it aimed to engender a collaborative educational ethos equipped to broach diverse social and global challenges.

Comprising a team of committed internationalists, based both at the University and amongst its academic and non-academic partners, the India Dialogue has gone from strength to strength in advocating for meaningful and sustainable educational relations in an array of contexts. For example, during the 2015-2018 phase, which connected the 70th anniversaries of the United Nations and of the Republic of India, the India Dialogue led a series of compelling policy dialogues that broached challenging topics, such as UN reform and India-UK relations post-Brexit.

More recently, the India Dialogue has sought to consolidate its working relationship with diverse stakeholders – such as students, alumni, exponents of bilateralism and multilateralism, and advocates of social and environmental sustainability – with a view to embedding a new ethos of University Social Responsibility (USR) in international relations. In 2020, just before the Covid pandemic started to impact on the regular workings of the University, the India Dialogue produced a far-reaching handbook entitled *University Social Responsibility: From Dialogue to Implementation*. This set out the main principles and characteristics of the USR concept and its intrinsic diversity and complexity, especially in view of evolving India-UK relations and the global Higher Education commitments of different participants. Whilst the United Nations General Assembly’s vision of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals provides a much needed framework for contemporary global citizenship, the range of principles that underpin the SDGs are lesser-known, even though they are, in many ways, reaching a crisis-point.

In this context, the work of academics and students – as well as of professional and social organisations – committed to social and environmental justice merits both (a) continued support and acknowledgement, as a well as (b) a new kind of coherence and depth that attends to the interconnection of the Five Principles of peace, partnership, people, planet and prosperity. Herein, the ‘Humanities in India’ strand of UEA’s India Dialogue activity merits prolonged attention, given the capacity of its main exponents and associates to implement an important dimension of USR, namely Academic Social Responsibility (ASR).

Emerging from the pragmatic tradition that linked twentieth-century political philosophy to both social activism and educational policy, ASR comprises largely unwritten, but much-needed and at times highly effective and intercultural, discourses of social inclusion, social justice, and social responsibility. For example, as is seen in this Series of Dialogues on Decolonisation, the social responsibilities of diverse Humanities academics based in India and the UK are articulated in highly nuanced ways that attend to a plethora of interconnected pedagogical, methodological, interdisciplinary, inter-personal, institutional, representational, and ethical concerns.

Jon Cook and Daniel Rycroft would like to thank all participants in this Series for their important and timely interventions. Special thanks are also given to Laura Ali, for her reflective and incisive bulletins, as well as for her work in putting together many of the additional resources. In order to cite this document, you may like to use the following wording.

Rycroft, Daniel ed. *Dialogues on Decolonisation*. Norwich: UEA, India Dialogue (2021)

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