

Semiotic Travels: An Interview with Harjeet Singh Gill

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Harjeet Singh Gill is one of the doyens in the field of semiotics in the Indian subcontinent. Hailing from Punjab, a region that straddles the border between modern-day India and Pakistan, Gill spent his formative years (1963-1968) studying linguistics and semiotics at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris under the tutelage of the well-known French linguist Andre Martinet. During that period, Gill interacted with some of the great modern-day thinkers of the time, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Claude Levi-Strauss. Gill returned to Punjab in 1968 as a Professor of Linguistics at Patiala University and started the department of Anthropological Linguistics there, one of the first of its kind in South Asia. In 1984 he moved to New Delhi to take up the post of Professor of Linguistics at Jawaharlal Nehru University. From 2000-2003 he was also a fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. Gill continued his close engagement with the French academy, taking up visiting professor roles at the Maison de L'Homme and the College de France.

Gill has a vast and eclectic body of work, but he is most known for his extension of the twelfth century French semiotician Pierre Abelard's ideas in order to challenge dominant notions of the sign. Gill argues against the distinction between synchrony and diachrony and suggests that processes of signification emerge through a dynamic and dialectical interaction between concept and structure. He firmly believes, drawing from Abelard, that any analysis of semiotics must foreground individual creativity as the driver of human meaning-making.

His use of Abelard to critique dominant trends in European semiotics finds its parallels in his extensive work on Buddhist philosophers Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, who posed an alternative notion of the sign to that developed by the more celebrated earlier grammarians from the Sanskrit tradition, Pāṇini and Bhṛtiharī. He places these heterodox Indian and French traditions of semiotics in creative dialogue to cultivate a semiotic theory that is at once universal in its applicability while also allowing for multiple, non-dominant forms of thought and creativity to emerge. Consequently, his ideas provide a new way for semiotics that would be particularly relevant for scholars working in postcolonial Asia.

He has several books to his name, some of the most famous of which are Structures of Narrative in East and West (1989), Abelardian Semiotics (1989), The Semiotics of Conceptual Structures (1996), and Signification in Buddhist and French Traditions (2001). His influential edited collections include Ideas, Words and Things: French Writings in Semiology (1992, co-edited with Bernard Pottier) and Signification in Language and Culture (2002). He also has published linguistic writings, including a reference grammar, on Punjabi, has written on the Sikh gurus, and has translated Sufi Punjabi poetry into English.

This interview is an abridged and edited excerpt taken from an interview conducted with Gill by Nishaant Choksi and Arka Chattopadhyay at a virtual seminar held at IIT-Gandhinagar on 31 March 2021. The entire recorded interview can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jb6fG3 hvqq>. A special thanks to Shruti Nair for her assistance in transcription.

NC: In linguistics, Saussure has been a very dominant influence. He had training in Sanskrit and was inspired by the Sanskrit Grammatical traditions. In Europe, we have structuralism and post-structuralism which directly trace to Saussure, and in America, the linguistics of the

Chomskian kind also has its roots in Saussure. You are familiar with those traditions, but I'm wondering what drew you to Abelard, who is unknown to many modern scholars of semiotics? In the same vein, unlike many Indian scholars, you do not rely on the Sanskrit Grammatical traditions but instead, base your theories on Buddhist linguistic thought. Can you tell us a little about why you felt like drawing from these thinkers as opposed to established semiotic theories like those of Saussure or Peirce? How does this offer us a different grounding of semiotic thinking from European and Indian traditions?

HSG: I think we can begin with a small exposition of how I understood language and how I studied language. We can start with India. Already you mentioned that Saussure was a scholar of Sanskrit. Actually, he began as a scholar of Sanskrit and then went further. Now in the Indian tradition, we have Pāṇini, to begin with, and before Pāṇini, we had Yāska. Yāska was more interested in etymology, if I have to explain words in terms of their historical meanings. By the time of Pāṇini, the linguistic problem in India was that Sanskrit was rarely spoken.

The goal of Mīmāṃsā, that is, the tradition of religious ritual, was to standardise the language of the Vedas. Because it was a sacred language and not just any language, the task given to Pāṇini was to give a standard grammar (*Vyākaraṇa*), and that is what he did, and he did an extremely wonderful job, which has not been improved upon until now. What he primarily documented were the phonetics, the phonology, and the morphology of the language, that is, the pronunciation and the grammatical formation of verbs, etc. He concentrated purely on the formal aspect of language so that the Vedic language should have a standard pronunciation and the pronunciation was sacred. So that was his job.

A few centuries later came Bhartrhari, and he was also following the tradition of Mīmāṃsā, but from the formal aspect of languages, such as phonology and morphology, he wanted to emphasise the semantic aspect of language. So, he presented a theory called Sphoṭa. In Sphoṭa, it is utterance, and it is more like Foucault's enunciation, a statement. So, he said that it is not the words that are responsible for the signification of the given utterance; it is the utterance itself, a given utterance, a given enunciation. The utterance may be small or long, one word or ten words, or whatever. But he emphasised the meaning of these words, the fixed meanings of these utterances. Again, the question arises where the Sanskrit language, because it is sacred, its formal aspect, its pronunciation, and also its semantic aspect, its meaning, becomes fixed. Then came the Buddhist thinkers Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, and following the tradition of Nagarjuna, they argued that language is not fixed. Not that they were against the proper pronunciation of Sanskrit, they all wrote in Sanskrit, but they said that language, like reality, is in flux. Their major point of departure was that language was not sacred; it was not the creation of gods. It is a human institution, and since reality is in flux, language is also in flux. That is, we have a given experience, and by the time we say something, it has already passed. In reality, we have a past and future, and now, there is a present as well.

So, what is language? Language is a certain experience, but this experience, by the time it has taken place, has already passed. You don't have the effect of the experience, but you have the memory of the experience. This leads to the question of discourse, the question of imaginaire, *kalpanā*. In the domain of *kalpanā*, you constitute discourses; you try to understand what happened. In modern terminology, it is called an existential experience. Now that experience in the domain of *kalpanā* is reorganised and reconstituted as a discourse, and it becomes *vikalp*. This is the situation in the earlier days of India.

While I was working in this field, my interest was primarily in western traditions from Plato to Aristotle and the twelfth century French philosopher Pierre Abelard. His theory of language I found very fascinating, although unfortunately, it is not very popular in France, and in fact, there are very few scholars of Abelard all over the world. His theory of language is explained in an excellent book by Jean Jolivet called *Arts du langage et théologie chez Abélard*.¹ I was reading Abelard, and I consulted a book by the Russian scholar of Buddhism,

Stcherbatsky,² who had written *Buddhist Logic* in two volumes. He says that in the Western tradition, the major debate was between the Realists and Nominalists, the followers of Plato and Aristotle, respectively. For Plato the ideas were real. For example, the ideas of beauty, of justice, of truth – they are real and eternal. Aristotle was a nominalist. For example, the famous sentence in old European philosophy that Socrates is a man. What does it signify? He is, of course, a person. You can talk to him, see him, but what does ‘man’ mean? There are so many men. They all differ from each other, so what is the idea, what is the concept of man, what makes a man a man that you can identify that this is a man? For Plato, it is the idea of man, the idea which is independent of any human man. Man dies, Plato dies, Aristotle dies, but the eternal idea of man does not die. Now Aristotle, who was a student of Plato, said there are, of course, different men, but in all of man there is a common denominator. The idea of a man is within a man, and when a man dies, the idea also dies with him. It is more empiricist because Aristotle was a scientist. Stcherbatsky demonstrated that this debate was common to both India and Europe. Then we have Abelard. In the twelfth century, he tried to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. His famous statement is *le mot mene a l’idée, l’idée à la chose* the word reaches to the idea, the idea to the thing.³ We begin from a given specific reality, but that is nothing more than a point of departure. The idea of something comes from a thing, but then the word, the name, the nomenclature, that is what leads to the idea of the object. There is no direct correspondence between the word and the object. From the word, you go to the idea of the object, and from the idea of the object, you go to the object. The second most important statement is that the idea of a thing is not a thing. Even though the idea is of a thing, it is not a thing. The idea always remains abstract; it is conceptual, and it is eternal, whereas the thing is a specific fact. Like Spinoza said, we have to distinguish between a fact and a concept or idea.

Now, this is an important question because later on in the European tradition, Descartes talked about the innate ideas, the ideas that are born with a human being, such as the theory of reflection, etc. Condillac is more like Abelard. We begin with objects, from real objects, and then we go to ideas, generalisations. For example, you have a cherry that has a certain colour, shape, taste, etc., but then you have so many cherries, and no two cherries have the same taste or look. We derive from a cherry the idea of a colour, a taste, a form. We say it is red, round, sweet, something like that. But in all the cherries, it is not the same red or sweetness, yet we say sweet, red, and so on. What happens is that when we communicate, we communicate with words that give the impression that they have some specific meaning, but actually, they do not.

In Buddhist terminology, a word is a concept. Dignāga says very clearly that it is a concept. There are two important issues when we deal with a concept or an idea. A concept or an idea, first of all, is ambiguous. It can mean so many things. Like the word red can have hundreds of types of redness, for the word justice, a given incident can be just or unjust, but that incident does not give us all the information about justice or injustice. Justice, as such, is independent of all the incidents that are just or unjust. Duty, justice, truth, these are ideas. It is very important that the concept is ambiguous, but that also means a word is a concept; a word as a concept is ambiguous. Number two, this ambiguity is inexhaustible. They are both interrelated. Now ambiguity means it can mean hundreds of things. Your chairs have different forms. When a child asks, “What is this?” You say, “This is a chair,” or “That is a chair.” For different forms of a chair, the word is the same for all of them. The word chair is independent of any given chair. Now a child, after he becomes 18 or so, he asks what does a chair mean? It can mean ten things; it can mean eleven things, also. If he is a designer or an artist, he says that on the idea of a chair, I can design a chair that will have a form that has not yet been created earlier. From the idea of a chair, you can create an innumerable number of chairs. They all will be chairs, but they are not copies of a given chair.

In the Platonic sense of the term, you imitate the idea of a chair. Socrates used to give the example of a bed, which was at the end of the *Republic*. There is a Greek state in Athens, and there is the idea of a state. And then, he gives an example of a bed, when an artisan

makes a bed. There are two ways in which he can do it. One, he simply copies a bed like an ordinary carpenter. But if he is an artisan, if he is a designer, he looks for the idea of the bed. Plato says – Socrates says rather – that God has created a bed, an ideal bed. It is a separate issue whether he created it or not, but the effect remains that the words of our language are ambiguous. Words as concepts of our language are ambiguous, and this ambiguity is inexhaustible. And it is only because of this that creativity is possible. Otherwise, creativity is not possible. For example, if you think of what is justice? In the old days, for the thieves, you cut their hands, and if somebody kills, you murder or hang them. Now the facts remain the same, somebody killed somebody, but the idea of justice is not the same. Already in most countries, the death sentence is abolished, and even if it is not abolished, it is rarely executed. In India, it is not abolished but so rarely executed that if you read the newspaper, when somebody has to be hanged, they have to go find a hangman because nobody has been hanged and there is no hangman left. The main point I want to make is that, first of all, what is language? Language is words. Language is concepts. In language, you deal with concepts and ideas.

Then the question arises, what is a text? Because with language what we do is we constitute a text. For semiotics, text not only means language: there is the cinematographic text, some of my students have worked on films, especially Bengali films, and then there are dances, there are paintings, and all kinds of texts of different literatures. We must first of all independently define what a text is. A text is a specific articulation of a specific perception of a specific existential experience. We can go the other way around. We begin with a given existential experience, not just any experience. The difference between literature and journalism, for example, is that journalism is more interested in facts. A creative writer is interested in the experience, not the factual experience, but the existential experience. And how this existential experience is perceived is not the same thing, nor how it is articulated. In this, the question of language arises because every language has its problems, its restrictions, and its repetitions.

Here we may mention the very interesting philosophy of a modern French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty. He says that when a child is born, he learns whatever language is there, a given language that is already there, a given culture, and a given religion as he becomes a speaking subject. When a child imitates his elders, he is a speaking subject – they tell him this is how you should pronounce, this is what it means, this is how you should behave, etc. Then slowly, Merleau-Ponty says, the child grows into a thinking being. He begins to think just like I first mentioned, “This is a chair,” and then the child grows up and asks, “What is a chair?” So as a thinking being, he begins to appropriate a language; he begins to use language in his own way. This is where we can come to Saussure, the concepts of parole and langue. Now langue is the social, the general. You speak English; you speak Hindi; you speak Bengali. But Parole is the specific individual use of that language. A good example is that of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore is born into a Bengali family and he learns Bengali like any child. He cannot contradict the rules of grammar, the rules of pronunciation, or the formal aspect of language. Now, as a thinking being of Merleau-Ponty, or as a thinking being of Descartes, he begins to appropriate; you see the two levels of learning a language. The first is the acquisition of language, and the second is the appropriation of language. Then Tagore as a writer begins to write in Bengali, the same Bengali that belongs to all other Bengalis, but also as an individual. This is what is the function of parole. There is a dialectical interaction between langue and parole. In the beginning, it is the aspect of langue that is dominant, and slowly the parole, the individual, becomes more dominant. Tagore writes in Bengali, in the Bengali that belongs to all the Bengalis, but at that same time only to him. This is the process of language. This is why the Buddhists were right. It is a dynamic process; it is a dialectic between parole and langue, between individual and social.

This is where Sartre would come in. For social sciences, it is the social aspect that they talk about in general – the rich and the poor, women and men. But Sartre said there is also the individual. His statement was that an individual belongs to a group, but the individual

is not dissolved in a group, and there is a kind of dialectical interaction between the two. This is how language is acquired and this is the same thing about the text. We can also see this in a very famous example of Lacan. As he says, *la femme n'existe pas*, the woman does not exist, but a specific woman exists.⁴ If you want to study and do psychoanalysis of a woman who comes to see you one must begin with the fact that she is a very specific woman and her case is very specific. It is the parole aspect. Within an individual person, there is an extreme intense dialectical interaction between langue and parole, between what you are supposed to do and what is done. There is specificity, and there is universality – without universality you cannot exist, but without specificity also, you cannot exist. So, in one sense, all human beings and all speakers of language contribute to creativity in the formation of language; because every human being speaks some language. Now we know that no two human beings who belong to the same linguistic community talk exactly the same way. As a matter of fact, two human beings don't even walk the same way. You see, there is the langue of walking; a child is, in the beginning, told how to walk, then what happens is that every human being walks in a different way. This is a natural fact. You can even recognise a person from behind if you know how he walks.

What happened in modern linguistics and modern social sciences is that they concentrated only on the langue aspect, on the social aspect. All human beings have the same problem – rich and poor. All these classifications are important, but that is nothing more than a point of departure. It is like saying, “He speaks Bengali, but that is not enough.” These are the rules of modern linguistics or modern social sciences study. I agree more with Sartre that an individual belongs to a group, but he never dissolves in the group. This emphasis on the individual aspect, on the parole aspect, is the most important aspect. It is the only creative aspect; otherwise, there can be no creativity. There will even be no life; there will be death. This is where Buddhism and existentialism come very close in saying that life is a very dynamic process. It is continuously changing one way or the other.

In modern linguistics, there is a difference between descriptive linguistics and the old historical type. In the old historical type, you have linguists such as Suniti Kumar Chatterjee⁵ say, “Okay, Bengali comes from Sanskrit,” etc. Then we had this revolution called the descriptive revolution, the structural revolution, where there is only synchrony. But they never realised that which I have tried to emphasise again and again which is that a synchronic structure is diachronically constituted and it is being constituted all the time. If you do not have a state of a language, or what Saussure used to say as *état de langue*, that will create a lot of problems. The problem is that we go from one extreme to another. In earlier days, the historical aspect was the only important thing, then the synchrony, the descriptive aspect, and the contemporary aspect became important. The problem is that it is a dialectical process: history and non-history are not independent of each other.

AC: I was interested in your writing about the notion of structure in the works of diverse philosophers from Abelard to Foucault and the relation between discourse and structure – discursive structure. I was wondering about a point in the essay on Abelardian discourse,⁶ where he talks about a movement from the universe of things to the universe of science, which is the basic movement in the creation of a discourse. I was wondering whether there could be structures in the very universe of things before they are discursified into a universe of science. I am speculating about the relationship between structure and discourse and whether there could be structure *before* discourse, *before* the discursive turn. I am also interested in the way he brings Abelardian theory of mental images in contact with the images of *kalpanā* (imagination) and also these notions of time that are coming from Saussure's synchronic and dichromic axis of language. In the essay on Abelardian discourse, he discusses the synchronic, the historical, and the mythical, and these are typologies of discourse. They are typologies of ideological time, but they are also formations of discourse. In the essay on Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*,⁷ you present this contrast following Foucault, between the history of ideas and Archaeology as a method. It's remarkable how archaeology as a method in the Foucauldian imagination, which you develop as a method, prioritises

contradiction and rupture more than the history of the idea, which is a coherent process. There is a dialecticisation that you talk about – a dialectic between langue and parole – a dialectic of contradiction that gets developed.

A quick second question I have is about the relationship between discourse and change and change in a social-political sense. I am thinking of how Lacan would develop his discourse theory in *Seminar 17* in response to the 1968 protest movement.⁸ We know the political underpinning of that theory – hysteric's discourse as a discourse of protest, master's discourse, and later on in Milan, he would introduce the capitalist discourse as a torsion in the master's discourse. This brings us to a complex contradiction in structuralism and French politics of the time. As we know, Lacan and some of these philosophers were critical of the discourse of 1968, but at the same time, it's more complicated than an outright rejection of the political protests. We have a slogan from the 1968 student protest where students say structures do not walk the streets. This particular tension that opens up between structuralism and student politics of 1968 is important. Professor Gill was a historical subject in that scene. He was right there in Paris. It would be great to hear his reflections on this because we haven't seen or heard the final word on that debate.

HSG: Thank you, Arka. These are significant questions that we should discuss. What is common to this so-called structuralist movement and semiotics, the movement where you have Levi Strauss, Lacan and Foucault, and Althusser? Levi-Strauss is an anthropologist; Foucault is a historian of ideas; Lacan is obviously a psychoanalyst; Althusser is more interested in Marxist thought, and Derrida is obviously keen on deconstruction. From the very beginning we have two theories of how this world was made. One is the Christian way, in the beginning, say with Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, he did not create a method; he was a mathematician, an architect. He organised the method in such a way that he constituted a discourse of humanity and that is what is called philosophy, the idea, this whole organisation, the body, the soul, the eternity of the soul.

Aristotle says and he is not very far from Plato, but he says his god is only a prime mover. There is a matter, and he just gives a push in a certain way that after that he is out of it, and it's purely scientific, empirical – stars and the planets, the spheres interact with each other and gravity and, after that, there is nothing to do. It is like the Buddhist karma; the Buddhists never believed in God; they said it's karma – as you sow, so you reap, depending on your good and bad deeds – it's absolutely logical. Similarly, during the time of Abelard, there was a controversy about the relationship between God and Jesus Christ. Jesus is like his son. So, what is the relationship between a father and son – who is higher than the other? Now it was a serious problem for the Christian metaphysicians to decide. They said it's only a matter of faith. They could not decide, and Abelard said, no, we can decide logically, and what is the logic of that? God, before the birth of his son, Jesus, was great, he was omnipotent and could do everything, but he was not a father. It is the birth of the son that made him the father. See, these are all logical propositions that the birth of the son is also the birth of the father, metaphorically speaking. To explain this, I would give more ordinary examples like, if you have a man and a woman, this is the empirical physical reality, and there is marriage between the two. This act of marriage makes the male a husband and the female a wife. In Abelardian terms, the wife derives her wifeness from the husband, and the husband derives her husbandness from the wife. Their being is acquired simultaneously and exactly at the same time. Then they have a child. Before the birth of a child, male and female are only husband and wife. The birth of a child transforms them into a father and mother. Without a child there can be no father and mother, so what makes them that? The child. All human discourses are absolutely equal in this philosophy. Abelard's explanation was logical, but it was also dangerous, because the very notion of hierarchy is abolished; in this logic, there can be no hierarchy because one is dependent on the other. It relates to the core question of Being and the Other. Being and Other derive their meaning from each other.

The Other and the Being are not independent entities. This is what happened in 1968. In 1968, if you are familiar with the French educational system, though professors are appointed by the government and all education is public, for the last 1000 years, at least 800 years from the time of Abelard, they have had absolute autonomy. On the one hand, professors are much respected, for the students they are like gods, and suddenly there is another discourse that says no, the students have a right to ask questions, and the students want to know what they are teaching. So, what happened was that the students occupied the Sorbonne, the university, and they invited all these professors who used to give lectures in big halls; they used to give lectures like magistrates, and the students would just listen. They had no right to question. There was also this inspiration from China, from Mao Tse-Tung. *The Red Book* by Mao was famous, and it was a best-selling book in Paris at the time. That the students, the people, have the right to ask questions; they have to ask, what are you doing? Who are you? They asked Sartre to come, and he came. This was the tradition. No great thinker refused the students; they were interrogated for hours. So, on the one hand, all these professors had the notion of authority, of their ideas, of their scholarship, and of course, they were great thinkers; they were masters of thought not only in France but all over the world. As a matter of fact, in the sixties, in France, the structuralist movement did not only dominate Europe at that time; it dominates even today. The Anglo-Saxon world has not produced a great thinker for the last 100 years. I mean everywhere in America and Europe, everywhere people are studying Lacan and Foucault, Levi Strauss. Another important thing about French education, as opposed to Anglo-Saxon education because I have studied in both – I was in the US, and then I came to France – is that in the Anglo-Saxon world, education has a specialisation – you are a literary something, you are a sociologist, you are an anthropologist, and so on. But in the French education system, in their baccalaureate, philosophy is a compulsory subject. All French students, even if they are going to become scientists, have had an intensive course on philosophy. This is why whether it is Levi Strauss or Lacan, they were all at the same time philosophers. This is why Lacan was interested in literature; very few Anglo-Saxon psychoanalysts have had that much interest. Even though he talked about Freud, it is his interpretation that changed everything. From an Anglo-Saxon, outwardly physical psychoanalysis that discussed father and son, mother and son, he simply changed it. He said these are metaphors. Father can be a mother. Father can be anybody, whoever plays the role of the father. When one of our students was working on Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, interestingly all the critiques focused on the relationship between the father and son. In fact, in *Metamorphosis*, it is the son who plays the role of the father. It is the son who earns and the father and the whole family live on the son's money. So here it is, the son who plays the role of father. The question is that in semiotics, we do not take sex as empirical; they are signs of something, they are concepts, they are ideas. This is what happens in translation.

What is the common denominator which is very important? You asked this question of archaeology and Foucault. See, what is common to this movement is that instead of the linear progression of history, they thought that there is bricolage, that historical research is vertical, one after the other. Now Foucault said, no, it's more like archaeology. You take one thing from here, one from there, and put them together, and thus you constitute a discourse. This is what Lacan does, for example, in a famous statement, that whatever happens to us, whatever we read, the people we meet, we will forget it, but it is what happens to us that never forgets us. Every happening, every encounter and every reading we do leaves some trace on our unconscious, and this unconscious, according to Lacan, is structured like a language. Now, what does it mean? Your understanding of it is paradigmatic. You go back and forth; you suddenly think of something, and your memory goes back to that. See, if I ask you what you ate ten days back in the evening, you won't remember. Something happens, and it triggers, and you remember something that happened five years ago, and you know what you were eating and hear the voices of the people. This is going back and forth. This was common to Foucault, and this was common to others too. This is what Merleau-Ponty was doing at the same time, also Derrida.

Coming to Derrida, I don't like Derrida. First of all, Derrida borrowed a lot from Condillac, the eighteenth century philosopher. Composition and decomposition are Condillac's words. He said, if you want to understand a text, you should understand how it's constituted and de-constituted. In those days, watches and clocks were new things; so if you want to understand how a clock functions, you take out all its elements, all its little things, and if you are able to put them together in the way it used to function, then you understand it. Having said that, there are two sides to the same coin; de-constitution/decomposition and composition. You cannot understand composition without understanding decomposition. In a way, Derrida has not understood it; he has only understood deconstruction and not construction. If you want to understand a discourse, you must understand how it is constituted, and only then can you de-constitute it. This methodology is what I gathered and have tried to instil in my students. Some of them have done extremely well, much better than I would have done. I would tell them, this is the methodology, but actually, they are the practitioners, and when you practice, it is not very easy, it is very difficult, and some of them have done so well that I call them not my students, but my gurus.

AC: This is a question from one of our students. How do we reconcile with the literary and creative vision of someone like Mallarmé, who creates his own system of analogies and symbols and yet proposes a universalist book to come? So basically, how would you respond to the relation between parole and a universalist dream? That is her first question.

The second question is somewhat related. In relation to the combination of parole and universalist dream, how can we answer the question of creativity, especially when it comes to poetry as architecture?

HSG: That's the question of form and content. Every artist, every writer, great writer not only says something new but also says something in a different form because, without a new form, you cannot have new content. You see, form and content go together. Mallarmé is a specific case of experimentation with all kinds of forms. But even there are those who don't experiment that much like Valéry. Valéry didn't do it. Tagore didn't do it to that extent. Still, there is always a new form. I'll go back to the eighteenth century. In Abelard's times, it was the formula of signification: word, idea, and the thing. For the word, you go to the idea and from the idea to the thing. In eighteenth century logic and grammar, you have a definition that from a word, you go to the image of the word, the resonance of the word, the very pronunciation of the word. The resonance of the word is also significant. What is the resonance of the word? It is form. From the resonance, you don't go to the object but to the image of the object. It is a very complicated affair. From the word, you go to the resonance of the word. This is why two words that mean more or less the same cannot replace one another; one is more suitable in one situation and the other in another, even though they mean more or less the same. More or less, the same does not mean the same. So, the very resonance of the word, you know, slogans, why do they become so popular because they require a certain resonance in the way they are pronounced. The very pronunciation, they rhyme. So, form is very important.

This is natural. I can give you a simple theory of fashion. Every fall, every winter, you have different forms of robes, kurtas, and six months afterwards, the same designer, not another designer, presents a collection with other clothes: other forms. That somehow the use of form, little more use of form, by that use, the significance is lost. If you want to say something new, you must say something new with a different form, and all creative writers have tried doing that in their own ways. But you take the case of fiction; in the old days, novels used to be 500-600-1000 pages, and the forms were very different. Dostoevsky's novels and, later on, you have Tolstoy; they are all very different. So there is no way out; the creator has to be able to create a new form to say something new.

AC: Another question an attendee is asking is if you could elaborate on the link between anti-structuralism or deconstruction or change in general and epistemic violence in the language in the context of 1968.

HSG: You see, first of all, theoretically, very few people understand what structure is. You cannot understand a structure without positing, at the same time, the notion of anti-structure. When we talk about the dynamicity of a structure, this is what we mean. See, there are certain forces, certain elements, and certain oppositions; some have a greater functional load, while others have a less functional load. I gave you the example of Mao. Althusser applauded the theory of contradiction in Mao. Now Mao, after Marx and Lenin, is the first person who defined opposition, especially contradiction in Marxist terms, such that there is no specific content of contradiction. At a given time, there can be different contradictions, and some contradictions are primary, some secondary, and others tertiary. Some contradictions which are more important today may or may not be important after some time. What he says is that all differences are potential contradictions. Some have more functional load today, and after some time, there can be some other contradiction. This is why those Marxists who only tried to understand contradictions in terms of the Marxist studies of nineteenth century industrial Europe just could not understand it. They thought that there could never be Marxism in a country like Russia because that was considered very backward, and later on, the same Russians thought, how can the Chinese have anything to do with Communism or Marxism?

The point is that the contents of the contradiction are not fixed. The contradictions in French society, educational society, and intellectual society changed. Some older professors were still sticking to the older contradictions (this is what a professor is or a university is). And gradually, there was the influence of other universities. First, there was China, then Berkeley and Heidelberg. But later on, when I wrote my article on the '68 movement,⁹ I tried to understand how, even there the problems of students, the universities are the same as everywhere. They want more posts, want more this, and more that. But there was something very specific and peculiar to the French tradition because the French tradition of education of the Professors had been going on for 800 years. So there was continuity. This is why synchrony was reconstituted diachronically, and there were contemporary influences from Peking and Heidelberg and from France's own history. For example, at the University of Sorbonne, so many times, the professors were expelled! When Descartes proposed his theory of "I think therefore I am," it contradicted the whole Christian theory. If being depends on your thinking, where does God stand? The Christian metaphysics is gone. As a result, the research faculty of Sorbonne did not allow Descartes to be taught in Paris for practically 100 years. Descartes was taught in all universities in Europe except France. But now the irony is that the same Sorbonne, after some years, renamed the universities and you know what it is called? Sorbonne is now called the University of Rene Descartes.

NC: We talked a lot about the past, such as your experience in France in 1968 and also what came out of that movement, both in terms of theory and politics. Recently you wrote a book called *Jawaharlal Nehru University North Gate*,¹⁰ articulating what is happening now in India, addressing the political churning, the reactionary backlash, and the multiple contradictions we are facing in the present moment. As we saw in 1968 in France, there was a dialectical engagement between theory and politics, where new lines of investigation were created from different political currents. So, what do you think about India now? Do you think certain new lines of theoretical inquiry can be developed and cultivated through the events we are now facing in our current political context?

HSG: See, what happened in JNU, in a way, is nothing new;¹¹ it is like in the history of French universities, you know, all universities everywhere, in all establishments. Whenever some political parties come into power, they try to control them. That is nothing new. What our politicians are doing, all politicians have been doing for several 100 years. Many professors of Sorbonne were expelled so many times, but they came back. For me, this is what is happening in JNU or what is happening these days in all universities across India.

JNU, somehow, for me, is not that great a university; it's a good university. For the students and the professors, there was enough space for different kinds of thinking, different kinds of teaching, and different ideas. They are considered very leftist, but for me, they are

mostly liberal. Even the BJP¹² students of JNU are more liberal than others. For example, in my class, you study everything. We study Foucault, Lacan, Bhartṛhari, Pāṇini. We study everything. The only problem is that those administrators or those in power think they are trying to impose Indian tradition. The so-called RSS¹³ and all that. They don't know anything about the Indian tradition. They don't know how Bhartṛhari was diametrically opposed to Pāṇini. You have Samkhya and Nyāya-Vaisheshika on the one hand, and Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta, and they were all different schools. This is our tradition. We have six schools, which are six shastras, all different from each other, even if they link together. Samkhya did not believe in God; Samkhya was completely materialist. In Nyāya, everything is logical. The theories of Nyāya are very much like structuralist theories. When I started studying Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, I realised that I found the same kinds of things as what I was studying in Europe, different examples but the same typology.

See, we are stuck with history. We always say that somebody borrowed from us, and we say, "Oh no, no, we had this before," and, "The Europeans have borrowed from us." What happens is when you ask similar questions such as what is a man, what is a woman, what is life, and what is death – these are fundamental questions. When you ask in any tradition, their answers will not be identical but similar. There are bound to be a lot of similarities. For example, when you ask how a language functions, whether you ask that in European tradition or Indian tradition, or even within Indian tradition. For Bhartṛhari, language functioned in one way; for Dignāga, in a totally different way, and they are both parts of our tradition.

See, what goes on in the universities, the problem is that, by and large, the critical masters are illiterate. As simple as that. They don't know their own tradition, and that is why all the problems arise. But I am quite hopeful. This comes and goes. Politics is like that. The thing is, nothing is permanent. Today they are masters; tomorrow, somebody else will be the master. So, there is nothing to worry about. The situation is very bad, it is very sad, and it is very depressing, but at the same time, history means the history of ideas, not the history of the kings and queens. So, no problem, it will be okay. Human beings are endowed with innate ideas; this intellect is innate. This is what Plato and Aristotle said. They said you don't have to learn it; it is there. Every human being is an intelligent being. Some exercise intelligence a little more, some a little less. Like writers – every speaker of a language can write; it is just that some become better writers than others, that's all.

I presented the case in *JNU Northgate*. That was what was going on at that time, and I felt it very deeply. Obviously, I taught there for 15 years, and as a Professor Emeritus, I keep going there, so naturally, I was not happy, but that does not mean that there is no future. I think the students at the universities will definitely go through it. There is no hopelessness. It is sad. It is not good. It should not happen, but it happens. But the only good thing is that it has been happening all the time. What these people are doing is nothing new. So many people do it. Let them do it. We, as students of the history of ideas, play our role. They play their role. I think we should live and let live. That's all we can do.

Notes

¹ Please see *Art of language and theology in Abelard*.

² Russian Indologist Fyodor Ippolitovich Shcherbatskoy, commonly referred to as Th. Stcherbatsky is the famous author of the two-volume set *Buddhist Logic* (1930-1932). The book has been republished several times in various languages throughout the world.

³ See Gill's introduction to *Conceptualism in Buddhist and French Traditions*, which contains the quotation. This line of thought is also expanded upon in the essay "Abelardian Linguistics" in *The Semiotics of Conceptual Structures* (pp. 38–61).

⁴ Please see *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (p. 7).

⁵ Outlined in Chatterjee's famous works such as *The Origin and Development of Bengali Language*.

⁶ "Abelardian discourse" from *The Semiotics of Conceptual Structures* (pp. 74–87).

⁷ "Archaeology of Knowledge," *ibid.* (pp. 262–272).

⁸ Please see *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

⁹ "The Myth of the Great Professor and Good Student: The Semiotics of the Students' Movement of May, 1968 in France" In *The Semiotics of Conceptual Structures* (pp. 281–305).

¹⁰ Please see the "Works Cited" section for details of the book.

¹¹ Referring to the events on 5 January 2020 where people wearing masks were allowed into the campus of Jawaharlal Nehru University and orchestrated an attack on students inside the campus. The attackers were allegedly part of right-wing organisations recruited to stem student protests who, according to many witnesses, received tacit support from the police and university administration.

¹² Bharatiya Janata Party, a right-wing religious nationalist party currently in power in India.

¹³ Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is a Hindu nationalist cadre-based volunteer organisation that espouses a cultural ideology known as Hindutva.

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