

Report: Course in Semiotics 2015

The Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore conducted a course in Semiotics in the month of July 2015. The program was coordinated and led by Prof. Ranjit Singh Rangila, who was well supported by a team of renowned academics. The team included Dr. Sohini Ray, Prof. Kikkeri Narayana, Dr. Sushant Kumar Mishra, Prof. Probodh Jhingan and Prof. Jagbir Singh. The course was conducted over a period of eight days starting from 10th July 2015 to 17th July 2015 and was working with the aim of linking the eastern and western semiotic traditions. The course was attended by students from the Central University of Karnataka, University of Mysore and University of Hyderabad.

Prof. Rangila's session titled "Semiotics/Semiology West and East" was designed in such way as to introduce the basic concepts to the students without lingering too much on the technical terms. The pedagogical approach he envisioned was supposed to break away from the traditional approach followed in the classrooms. He, therefore, started off by explaining the concepts of *La Langue*, *La Langage* and *La Parole* in terms of human physiology by equating them to human unconscious/conscious, central nervous system and speech respectively. It is interesting to note that he stressed on the different perspectives held by east and west regarding *La Langue* where Western tradition calls it unconscious, and eastern tradition calls it conscious.

After a brief discussion on the etymology of the word 'semiotics', Prof. Rangila introduced Ferdinand de Saussure to the class. He quickly pointed out how Saussure was a student of Sanskrit and how Bhartṛhari influenced the semiotic tradition established by Saussure. While the biographical details provided were kept to a minimum, he stressed the fact that Saussure's studies were not written down by himself. *A Course in General Linguistics*, the seminal work in western tradition was published by his students from their lecture notes four years after his death. Had it been his writing, a more evident and wider instance of Bhartṛhari's influence would have been visible.

The other western theoretician who was taken up for discussion was Charles Sanders Peirce, and the lecture began by pointing out the wrong way in which Peirce's name was pronounced even in academic circles. Once again the biographical details were kept to a bare minimum. The intention of this session was to introduce the basic difference between the

traditions of Saussure and Peirce, one is that of 'semiology' and the other is of 'semiotics'. Probably owing to the time limit, further discussion of Peirce was confined to his concept of 'abduction' which he introduced as an alternative way of thinking to the already existing concept of 'induction' and 'deduction'. This method was elaborated in detail through various examples by using the thought process of participants as a case study. The possibilities of using the method of abduction for the analysis of texts is probably one topic that could be used for a detailed study at the next level for the participants.

The second part of the lecture given by Prof. Rangeela focused on Panini and his work known as *PratibharSutar*. He began with a brief survey of Panini's life, how he educated himself in Sanskrit and the eventual composition of *PratibharSutar*, which was composed orally. Elaborating briefly on the links between Pratihara and Rigveda, the all-important concept of 'aiuN' was introduced. While the prime focus was to create a link between the Indian and Western tradition, participants were interested in exploring the possibilities of utilizing the Indian linguistic theories as mentioned in *PratibharSutar* which can be helpful in contemporary research initiatives in the field of applied or core linguistics in the regional Indian languages?

While Prof. Rangila dealt with the comparison of Indian and Western semiotics by studying how the explanation of the relation between signifier and signified in both traditions are astoundingly similar, Prof. Jagbir Singh's session on Semiotics and Indian Knowledge Traditions delved into a comparative study of Indic Dharma Tradition with the Abrahamic tradition which lays the basis for Christianity, Judaism, and Islamism.

His main contention was a proper understanding of how one's tradition is most important in analysing the civilization and the knowledge/dharma tradition of a society that is organised and defined around religious texts. But the scientific study of religion got marginalized in the modern world along with its attempt to save man from the forces of ignorance- like myth, superstition, etc. So it becomes the need of the hour to create interest among common man to have a scientific study of every phenomenon, especially the dharma tradition of one civilization where its structure and function are studied. He asserted that Semiotics as the scientific study of signs helps us to understand every cultural behaviour, knowledge traditions and social structures of our society.

Both the Indic and Abrahamic traditions are in search of the ultimate truth, but the approaches towards truth are different. Right from the definitions of God/Absolute (*nirguna*) *Brahma*, the conceptions differ. For a better understanding of the concept, a comparison was made of the narratives of the origin in both traditions, Abrahamic and Indic Dharma traditions. The semiotics of Origin of Life and Universe conversed in Abrahamic tradition centres around one Supreme Being, called as God, who has the power to control the world. His order is Universal, and its violation is ethically wrong. To lead a human life, one should obey the statutes of this Supreme Being. Whereas, in Indic Dharmic tradition it is the rhythm of *Dharma*/Ethics that is in control. According to *Dharmic* narratives, from the Supreme Golden Egg *Hiranyagarbha*, all creation was born. To Devas, Asuras and Manavas, the sons of Daksha Prajapati; the ethical values of self-control, compassion (*daya*) and *danam* — to give alms to the needy — are taught.

Further, the four major Dharma traditions, i.e., the Indic Dharma Tradition, Sanathan, Buddhism, Jainism and Charvaka Traditions were introduced. All these dharma traditions draw its philosophical view from the Vedic texts, yet, differ in certain aspects. Semiotics helps to appreciate each tradition in the modern context, analysing its significance in con-

temporary context. Understanding tradition and civilization is important in the contemporary scenario to make sure of the existence of civilization and our life in world history. The perception of the world and the individual way of life are the two parameters used in the semiotic analysis made in dharma traditions.

After explaining the roots of Bhakti movement in India and how it has affected not only Indic traditions but also Abrahamic traditions, especially, Islam and Christianity in India, Prof. Jagbir Singh concluded his lecture by asserting that India is a converging point of various knowledge traditions, and Semiotics can play a crucial role in analysing these traditions. One of the major questions raised at Prof. Singh's lecture was about the Abrahamic tradition that, again stresses the other mainstream knowledge systems. If we consider language as the repository of knowledge/s, what about the tribal/indigenous knowledge systems that continued orally? The examples of communities like *Ajwikas* were brought in by the participants for comparative studies. If Prof. Jagbir Singh's lecture gave an outline of how to analyse culture and knowledge traditions, Prof. Kikkeri Narayana's lectures on Semiotics of Ritual was a detailed investigation of the culture and traditions of *Jenu Kurbas*, a tribe of people living in the jungles of Karnataka. The sessions based themselves on the examples he took from the practices of this particular community that he has observed and studied over a period of twenty odd years as a part of his research.

He started with a detailed description of *Kont Puje*, a ritual that is associated with the creation myth of the community. He detailed the role of every individual in the ritual and tried to relate it to other creation myths existing in the societies. Invoking discussion from participants about such myths and incest taboos associated with every community across the country, he explained how the entire mechanism works in a similar way across the globe. He aptly brought in Claude Levi Strauss's studies in the context and further elaborated the ritualistic traditions using Michel Foucault's concepts of power structures and sexuality.

As the sessions progressed Carl Jung's concept of collective unconscious, and ouroboric mind was also taken up for explaining the practices of rituals and he stressed the importance of treating myths as metaphors and not literal texts for getting better results. In doing so, he tried to establish a connection between myth, metaphor and science through which he tried to place ritual as a converging point of all three of them. Since the idea of archetypes was a constantly evolving one for Jung himself, the discussions raised some questions regarding the use of this method in analysing rituals. The actualisation of any archetype demands a certain degree of individualization within the given context. Participants were left with questions about various cultures and rituals they have come across and the possibilities of a Jungian study of them.

Prof. Prabodh Jhingan's lecture on Semiotics of Theatre also focused on the practices of certain groups, the Khasi tribes of North East India. He structured his lectures in such a way that he could explain some of the theoretical concepts of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner in the initial stages and then provide the participants with a detailed description of his own experiments with the theatrical practices using the rituals of the tribes.

Turner's concepts of symbols and social dramas and Richard Schechner's concept of the environmental theatre were explained with examples and participants' enquiries about the connection of these two form with the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Certain references were made towards *Natyashastra* about the role of audience and their involvement in the practice of theatrical performance.

The second part of Prof. Jhingan's lecture focused on the rituals of the Khasi tribes of North East India. Their social practices were briefed for a better understanding of the myths associated with their culture and the rituals they conduct. For example, the matrilineal structure of family, the importance of women in society and the decision-making procedure, selection of bride and groom, importance of proving to be a capable warrior etc. were explained in this regard.

He described the various stages of the Nongkrem Dance, its procedures, the role of various people in the dance, its social significance etc., and then explained how he was able to observe this dance ritual in a theatrical performance. Prof. Jhingan's lecture invited questions on the idea of translation as well. It was pointed out that ritual performance and theatrical performance are not equivalent. Hence, queries were made on the loss of the cultural aspects of ritual performances when it is translated to the theatre.

In his lecture on Semiotics of Dance, Dr. Sushant Kumar Mishra had Bharatamuni's *Natyashastra* as its prime focus. He started his lectures by introducing the key concepts in semiotics so that his analysis of the text makes more sense to the participants. The first part of his lecture was completely devoted to this purpose. With a good set of examples and reference materials, he set up a strong platform for himself for the rest of the lectures, both his own, as well as others.

He began by explaining the etymological roots of the word from the Greek tradition where the word was used in medical sciences for examination of symptoms. He then did a systematic study of the evolution of the word and the meaning associated with it during various times in history. Starting from Plato and Aristotle, he spoke about St. Augustine, John Locke and concluded with a discussion of Saussure and C. S. Pierce giving brief, but crisp and concise information about the birth of semiotics as a field of study as we know it today. At the same time, he also made references to the Indian system of semiotics as well by taking examples from Patanjali's *Yogadarsana*, Mammata's *Kavyaparakasa*, and Bhartrhari's *Vakyapadiya*.

The second half of his lecture subtitled 'semiotics of *Abhinaya*' began by summarising *Natyashastra*. Because this text is often called as the fifth Veda or *Panchamaveda/Natyaveda*, the choice of this text was apt in multiple ways. Not only did it assert the richness and depth of our literatures dating back to the pre-Christian era but also provided an added dimension to our knowledge tradition and also acted as a good base for the perception of theatrical practices. A chapter-wise summary helped the participants grasp the basic idea of the text under study.

Abhinaya, a key concept in the Indian aesthetic tradition, which roughly means as something that draws the audience towards the experience of emotions, was discussed. In semiotic terms, this was conceptualised as a system of signs based on the imitative representation of the conceptualised external behaviour of the character according to different emotional states. He pointed out how theatrical communication treats every sign as a voluntary sign having predetermined communicative function. At the same time, the spectator is bound not to abide by those functions but is free to have his own interpretation of the same. This session invoked a discussion on Aristotle's concept of 'catharsis' and John Keats's concept of 'negative capability' and how those ideas may find similarities in certain regards with the notion of *abhinaya*.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints the other aspects of Dance and its semiotics could not be dealt with during the session.

Dr. Sohini Ray's lectures on Semiotics of Language and Culture were more participant-oriented in nature in the sense that she began her sessions by collecting the research interests of the participants and modulating the sessions to suit their interests. She had divided her lectures into four major sessions namely: (1) Language and Globalisation; (2) Language and Ethnicity; (3) Language and Gender; and (4) Literacy and Verbal Communication. The reading materials were mailed to the participants before each session though reading the text was not mandatory.

She began her lecture by giving a brief introduction to the field of anthropology and narrowing it down to linguistic anthropology, a field that is still a relatively unexplored area of research in India. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis was introduced to the participants as a beginning point to establish the relation between language and culture. Both strong and weak versions of this treatise and the disagreement held by many linguists about the same were discussed. Participants pointed out the inappropriateness of calling the treatise as strong and weak rather than terming them as basic and refined.

The session on language and globalisation began with a discussion of globalisation and the global village. Based on the response from the participants, references were made towards David Harvey's concept of 'Time-Space Compression'. Discussions on of how technology has simultaneously brought us closer and dragged us far away were made from various perspectives. While the use of technology in the birth of notions like 'global village' and both the capitalist and Marxist perspectives of the same remained as the main focus, references were also made towards futuristic movies like *Interstellar*, which utilised the idea of time-space compression in a different mode altogether.

Further discussion on the topic was based on Jan Blomaert's essay *A Critical Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Two major areas, the sociolinguistics of distribution and the sociolinguistics of mobility were touched upon in this session. Two major question were raised in this session regarding diasporas: (1) the role of language and linguistic differences in the formation and stabilization of diasporas; and (2) role of language centred cultural practices in the formation of diasporas. These two questions set the tone for the topics to be discussed in the session on language and ethnicity.

The session on ethnicity was based on Patrick Eisenlohr's book *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius*. The discussion covered how the Indian community has created a world of their own in Mauritius and even within the Indian community there exists a difference of opinions based on language differences. Political issues that happened in Mauritius as a part of conflicting interest on languages were cited as examples.

The session on language and gender was proactive as the issues discussed in the session was of high social and political relevance. Dr. Ray pointed out how various studies conducted on language systems have inferred that in most of the languages of the world the slang words are usually targeted at women at a higher ratio in comparison to men. Similarly, there are instances where a woman's body is often compared to food. This demanded a serious discussion and the participants positively protested against such tendencies existing in language stems which is nothing but a reflection of the cultural practices existing in a society as such. The discussion, as it progressed also raised the issue of the third gender, especially in terms of the abusive language used against them.

The final session of Dr. Ray dealt with literacy studies that began with a discussion on the habit of letter writing, a case study on the impact of literacy on cultural practices. *Nushu*,

a particular writing style followed by Chinese women to pass on the information of do's and don'ts to the next generation of women was another topic that was taken up for study. Niko Besnier's research on the intersection of psychological anthropology and literacy was also discussed in this session. An interesting observation at the end of this session was that the idea of imparting literacy into women followed its own politics of patriarchy. *Nushu* is a form to educate Chinese women, a knowledge system that belongs to women but it teaches how to be obedient to men.

Though the time frame of eight days was highly limited considering the depth of the topics covered during the workshop, it proved to be highly fruitful for the participants. As Prof. Rangila maintained throughout the course, there is no point studying post-structuralism if one does not understand structuralism. This course helped the participants to get acquainted with the basics of semiotics. It was highly beneficial in the sense that the lectures were not limited to the usual classroom methods that deal with semiotics as a linguistic idea alone. Rather, the different modules help the participants widen their visions about semiotics and the unending scope of the theory.

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