

Preface

The contents of this book were in preparation for quite some time. They all emerged as discrete segments in response to the context of teaching humanities in “contemporary” India. The predicate in the previous formulation confronts us with many questions—questions concerning signatures, addressees, their teaching/reading frames, the ends of the domain, and above all, the specificity of the context of responding to the humanities. *Who* are we and *what* are we (if there is a “we”) doing with/in the humanities in/from India? This work emerges out of the unease experienced in the everyday practice of reflecting on the instituted domain of the humanities.

The field of humanities is the legacy of Europe in cultures that faced colonialism. This legacy pervades the institutional and intellectual formations of the humanities in India even to this day. Millions of students study humanities in thousands of higher education institutions in India today. But the student composition is markedly heterogeneous as the students come from divergent bio-cultural communities (called *jatis*). The future of the humanities, it seems to me, in India is contingent upon the exploration of the cultural forms (in image, music, text, and performative compositions) of these divergent and countless communities. These unstructured forms with millennial genealogies pose fundamental questions concerning the relation between cultural formations and communication technologies. In the context of such a historical legacy any attempt to reorient teaching and research in the humanities in India is required to confront two related questions: (i) How does the field of humanities configure cultural forms and formations in India? And (ii) How do these forms and formations relate to communication technologies—from oral to digital—in their millennial existence? Intellectual and institutional futures of the humanities, (not only) in India, depend on how one addresses these questions.

Given the simple fact that the planet we inhabit (unevenly) is composed of heterogeneous cultural formations with multiple originations, the invasive, discursive (humanities), and institutional (university) contexts of teaching impel one to confront practical issues such as what should be taught and how should teaching move from the receiving ends of the European legacy in cultures that faced colonialism. One starting point that would provide a strategic node to bring together questions that emerged from the teaching scenario sketched above was to speculate on cultural difference. How do cultures differ from each other? To put it

more heuristically: how do we explore the difference between a culture that describes, theorizes, and institutionalizes the ends and discourses of man and another culture that does not systematize any such endeavors over millennia? Such a heuristic move could be made by focusing on how these cultures (“European” and “Indian”) articulated and transmitted their memories. I am aware that any such binary cannot be rigorously maintained, that they need to be overturned and displaced; but cultural difference cannot be explored without such improvisable heuristic moves. The fact that philosophical anthropologies persistently advance theoretical models of the “history of the West,” European entelechy, “metaphysics of presence,” “discourse of man” goes to prove that the modern European West has consciously invested in demarcating and distinguishing the cultural difference of the West (especially) from Asia. All explorations of cultural difference, however, need not be replications of European philosophical anthropologies. One must learn to configure these differences in different ways. This work concentrates on the destinies of mnemocultures to mark cultural differences between India and Europe.

Tracing cultural difference cannot be reduced to either “culturalism” or “essentialism.” Orientalist indulgences in stereotyping cultures have foreclosed serious inquiry into cultural singularities and differences in postcolonial thought. That cultures differ from each other is an empirical as well as theoretical assumption. Unlike the former (empirical), the latter requires working out internally consistent, sharable, or demonstrable analyses of commonly accessible material resources or complex compositions. The empirical and theoretical are not causally related. A “theory” that is built only on empirical material remains an ad hoc one—for its sustenance is contingent upon the vagaries of empirical sources. It is erroneous to reduce a theoretical inquiry into cultural difference to essentialism; for, such an approach does not presuppose difference empirically as already pre-given in the object itself. Tracing different patterns of organization in the very material that others have enframed in a certain way, a theoretical approach takes the risk of offering an account of the patterns; these accounts are ways of putting to work heuristic/“theoretical” insights into actual practice.

A theoretical inquiry functions within the parameters it sets for itself and it would be inappropriate to dismiss it merely on the basis of ad hoc parameters—that is, parameters that are not aimed at offering an alternative reflective insight. It is a bit like asking a Telugu singer to sing in Latin. One must see what the singer achieves in Telugu. An inquiry into cultural difference, therefore, can legitimately explore cultural material (that is, literary and philosophical, verbal and visual compositions). To charge such an inquiry as culturalist (what would be the fate of Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Derrida’s work—let alone the compositions of varied non-European cultures?) is to presuppose that cultural masterial derives from some other more tangible and transparent material basis—be it “historical” or “economic” or “political.” Such a charge does not see the primary necessity of inquiring into the epistemic privilege accorded to these presumed bases. I have not advanced this work explicitly as a “theoretical” venture as such. The phrase that I found useful in exploring the material in this work is *reasoning imagination*.

It is with this impulse of reasoning imagination that cultural difference is configured in this work. Moreover, I do not maintain the division between the empirical and theoretical in this work; such a template does not inspire this work. In a certain way, these categories are complicitous. *Cultures of Memory* is more a “radical empirical” (Derrida’s phrase) work aimed at epistemological alternatives for reflective practice.

There is no pre-existing theoretical model this work conforms to. I have come to learn that there isn’t any such model to address the questions broached in this work. Considerable amount of time was spent on the themes, motifs, and specific works explored in this book. The sheer enduring force of these works and the reasoning imagination that composes them helped me search for reflective directions. This does not mean, however, that this work is impervious to contemporary theoretical accomplishments and critical polemical debates that pervade and shape the university today. This work is alert to some of these developments and in fact engages them explicitly and obliquely throughout. I have no interest in offering this work as a representation of some phantasmatic homogeneous (“Hindu”) culturalist India.

It seems to me that one acid test for contemporary Indian intellectuals (and most of the generally educated persons) pertains to their position on caste/*jati*. Invariably the response is caught between the related poles of political correctness and “feudal benevolence” (Spivak’s politically correct formulation). These responses reel under the enormous burden of unexamined guilt and stigmatize *jati* in their responses. They reduce the *jati* person (especially the so-called “scheduled caste”) to an abject figure. Strangely, Gandhi and Ambedkar remain in complicity in this conception. *Cultures of Memory* affirms the possibility of a different conception of this much maligned “category” and advances the task of critical humanities as a preparation to learn from the *guardians of memory* of these *jati* cultural formations. In undertaking such risks I have tried to be as scrupulous as possible in qualifying the specificity of the issues and works I am dealing with.

Well-meaning friends are quick to ask: Where is Islam and Christianity in your work? I see more a symptom than the patience required to explore cultural difference in such questions. First, no one, to my knowledge, has demonstrated how/whether Sanskrit reflective traditions have been significantly transformed (except *perhaps* in the fields of astrology and music) in the second millennium with the intrusion of Islam and Christianity. No such work exists in the context of Telugu literary traditions. This, in my view, points to the reflective integrity of Sanskrit traditions of reasoning imagination. I have tried to elaborate this point in the chapter on (the millennial absence of) translation, in the Sanskrit traditions, in this work. Here, I do point out the ambiguous epistemic status of Islam (and Christianity) in the work. Second, apart from some intimate engagement with the work of Indology, which is surely a Judeo-Christian assessment of Sanskrit reflective traditions, throughout the work, I point out explicitly and implicitly that my own work is deeply set within the modern institutional context of the university. The university is surely a colonial Christian (Cartesian) legacy. Grappling with the European legacy of the humanities in India, I cannot denegate the double bind

I work in. It is from within this aporetic predicament that I see the possibility of approaching critical humanities.

All said, surely no authorial intention has complete control over the work such an “intention” (if that can be definitively captured) produces. A serious intellectual tome can be used as a paper weight or a door-stopper. Surely there is something inherent in the work that “lends” itself to such uses (its weight and bulk). One only hopes, without guarantees of course, for other and more productive reflective uses of one’s work. One cannot know with certainty, let alone command, the destinies and destinations of what one brings forth (“consciously”).

This exploration into cultures of memory demands access to pertinent languages of different cultural formations. Without basic training in classical European languages, my access to classical and modern European culture has remained solely through the English language. Although I have had some basic exposure to the Sanskrit language, I depend mainly (and only) on bilingual (Sanskrit-Telugu) texts in this work. Whereas I have direct access to Telugu works. I have pointed out these limitations mainly to underline the limits (in my context, at least) within which inquiries into the humanities from the receiving ends can be undertaken. Even this compromised scene of inquiry aims at affirming the persistence of life of thought and thought of life outside the English language. At a certain level, thought and life, however, are impelled to move in the double bind of the “teaching machine” (to use Spivak’s formulation) in the postcolonial humanities.

I must confess that although I critically engage with the work of Indology, I am neither a Sanskritist nor an Indologist by training. I have not taken recourse to critical editions nor deployed the diacritical apparatus in the presentation of my material and arguments in this work. I have transliterated all Indian origin words in the “common” English spelling. Even while citing the Indian origin words, I have tried to remain close to the Telugu rendering of them. This is because I have used mainly Sanskrit-Telugu bilingual compositions and commentaries in this work. All translations of Sanskrit citations in this work are drawn from this Sanskrit-Telugu interface; and all the translations into English, otherwise specified, are mine.

Although the chapters of this book can be read separately, they are all woven as nodes in a network. *Cultures of Memory* is offered as a modest portion of an immeasurable network woven by infinite clusters of nodes and knots. Retracing, reweaving, and suturing these nodes and clusters are the interminable tasks of cultures that faced colonialism. Unforeseen constellations of networks can be envisaged through such tasks. Critical humanities risk such tasks across heterogeneous cultural formations. While exploring the mnemocultural formations of India *Cultures of Memory* suggests the possibilities of transcultural critical humanities research and teaching initiatives from the Indian context in today’s academy.

Cultures of Memory in South Asia
Orality, Literacy and the Problem of Inheritance
Rao, D.V.
2014, XVI, 336 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-81-322-1697-1