



IN PRAISE OF FORM
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I studied History at Delhi University and joined the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) as an Associate Fellow (1977). CSDS remained my place of work until 2010. I was Professor and Senior Fellow in History and Anthropology and also served as Director of the CSDS. I took a long leave from CSDS to take up teaching and research work with other institutions: the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (Shimla), United Nations University (Tokyo), Hull University (UK), the National Museum of Man (Bhopal) and the Institut d'études avancées (Nantes). Currently I am Visiting Professor, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi. Publications include: *Tribal Identity and the Modern World* (New Delhi, 1994); *M. K. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj: A Critical Edition* (New Delhi, 2010). *Adhunikāta aur Pagan Sabhyatein* (New Delhi, 2012. = *Modernity and Pagan Civilisations*). Forthcoming: *Things as the Measure: An Essay on Gandhi's Critique of Modern Civilisation*. – Address: Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad, P.O. Central University, Hyderabad, 500046 A.P., India. E-mail: me@jyotirmayasharma.in

As a Fellow, my first day at Wiko was a Tuesday morning; a time meticulously kept for listening and responding to a Fellow speak of his or her work. The theme of the paper on that Tuesday (April 16) was language and the meaning of translation. Responses around the seminar table were from across the wide arch of human and natural sciences. Two hours after the opening utterance, the seminar reassembled for lunch rather differently around several tables: each on its own, but in subtle continuity. The rhythm of transactions in the two gatherings was manifestly dissimilar. In the conference room, speaking had to accord with a fairly rigorous protocol concerning relevance and duration. In the

restaurant, the explicit part of the protocol was all about food served with exquisite care. Its subtle continuity with the formal rigour of the seminar stemmed from a protocol rather fuzzy and rigorously implicit. One could for instance speak of or around the theme of the day. One could also, and without the slightest slight to the Wiko order of things, speak of other things, or of nothing. Form and distance fascinate me deeply.

Form is space and specificity. Form is marked by a clear boundary: the limit manifest, clear and discernible. Beyond that limit, form abruptly ceases and disappears. Implicit in the specificity of form is location and locale. And inherent to locale is the presence of other forms. Between forms subsists a quality utterly and absolutely unlike form: the absence or negation of form. In the absence of that grand limitlessness, form simply cannot be. And the sheer immensity that forms make available arises, it seems, from flows they make available or foreclose, between the formed and the horizon of their finality.

I see in the idea of an institute for “advanced study” affirmation of the need to mark and give form to a sense of “intimate distance” from the “university”. One could speak of the “university” as perhaps the grandest and most ancient of modern artefacts. The university as idea and form is anchored in ever more rigorous specialisation and clear disciplinary boundaries. Its power and resonance are truly stupendous. In instructive contrast, the idea of an institute for “advanced study” is of recent origin and commands little attention. Like most things that came to prevail in the 20th century, experiments with and around the idea of “advanced study” began, as we all know, at Princeton in the United States, that unique historical space given to re-making all human doing into specialised pursuits. As idea and form, “advanced study” signifies an attempt to nuance the sovereign standing of specialisation and disciplinary boundaries.

My work has been along two seemingly unrelated axes. First axis: the universe of discourse in India over the past 200 years in reference to modern universality, the idea of change and progress. Gandhi and Tagore have been the two seminal voices in this exceedingly varied and often perplexing universe. And both found themselves in a profoundly troubled relationship with modernity as fact and as possibility. Second axis: little ancient tribal communities of Central India’s sense of self and of the modern world as it relentlessly recasts the very basis of tribal life and existence. Shifting cultivation – known as “slash and burn” or “swidden” – is invariably seen as quintessential to the extreme isolation in frozen localism. I see in it the play of deep universality seeking for humans a presence on earth for all time.

At Wiko I sought to continue the work begun at IEA Nantes on word and image as two distinct forms of language and linguistic possibility. In common perception, words

signify language. The image is noticed and meaningfully engaged with in deeply imaginative ways. But despite that, the image is invariably not grasped in a clear, conscious way as a linguistic artefact. For that non-recognition, one could spell out an element that abides inseparable in words and remains altogether absent in the image. The word as sensory datum has to be heard as a soundscape, or when written, seen as an image. But that can never be definitive for its meaning. In fact, its meaning could be unrelated to its sensory standing as a soundscape or as an image. This kind of near absolute detachment between sensory datum and meaning is inconceivable in relation to image or sound.

The word's meaning unfolds in a certain structure of reference to other words. The image may evoke myriad associations of sounds, smells, words, forms, colours or other images. But unlike the word, the image does not dwell inseparable with other images. True, the case of the word indwelling with other words is suffused with acute ambiguity, born of inhabiting the liminal edge. For the word, that is its way and its way to meaning. The word unto itself is an empty sign, signifying nothing. My concern is the protean tension between reference and representation. Specifically, the word and the image need have no resemblance to what they seek to or come to signify. The question I pursue is: does this seeming un-relatedness, complete and near absolute at times, signify the presence of a certain deep universality as the predicate of meaning?

While at Wiko I sought to focus on two dimensions of the word and image theme:

- Colour, smell and sound as signifiers of meaning
- Implications of the image-artefact distinctions.

Smell, like colour and sound, is not unique to humans. Sensitivity to smell and the capacity to discern minute differences within a particular smell spectrum are infinitely sharper and more sophisticated in many other species. For instance, entomologists have long studied the complex communication code quite often loosely spoken of as “chemical language”. Biologists have taken note of the profound play of colour in the grand story of species survival. While lamenting the absence of a “history of colour”, Michael Taussig has remarked presciently the intense play of colour in human warfare. He speaks of the inversion and subtle presence of colour as camouflage in modern warfare.

Smell and colour acquire historical substance and meaning, unlike things such as “table” and “knife” or practices such as “cultivation” and “building”, as symbolic artefacts. In this context, the image stands on clearly distinct ground. Sensitivity to forms – visual and auditory – is a capacity numerous other species share with humans. But image-making, along with speaking, remains unique to humans. Like speech, image-

making is expressive of something beyond what can be seen, touched and heard out there. Specifically, an image abides beyond function; hence it is that an artefact shorn of functions lives on as an image.

I am putting together an edited volume based on the contributions to an international seminar I organised on “word and image” in New Delhi last November. In the next two years I hope to be able to put the last line on a little book on word and image.

I cherish immensely the joy and stimulation of conversation and interactions at Wiko. That happens of course in several forms. One could speak of the Tuesday seminar as the pivot: formal, neatly structured and marked by a sense of grand continuity, week after week, year after year. Along and around that pivot, several other forms – study groups, lectures, seminars, concerts and exhibitions – gave access to modes of knowing and intellectual-aesthetic sensitivities that are very rare. I recall in particular some enticing conversations with biologists on colour and choice. The experience of being a part of the group on word and image was truly rewarding for me. It gave me several spontaneous openings for conversation and reflection. I want very much to stay close to some enticing conversations that developed in the restaurant, the garden terrace or on that lovely little stretch between Wiko and Villa Walther.

I like to think of the Wiko experience as akin to being on a river to whose refreshing flow one could reach out and immerse oneself, more or less as one would like to. I know very little of all that has gone into its making. But I do have some sense of the intellectual sensitivity and deep commitment with which the Rector and the Secretary keep that flow refreshed and alive. Foremost, it entails meticulous organisation and forethought. All things and details are anticipated with great care. The moment you step into the reception you feel truly taken care of. The library personnel are simply wonderful. Each request, however whimsical, is serviced with great care and courtesy. I am clumsy with the computer. Wiko’s technical services were always kind and quick to help. I remember with admiration the skill and zest with which the kitchen staff provided for all manner of taste and preference. To all of them I am most grateful.