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Philological Conversation



Words and their Worlds: A Conversation with Dilip M. Menon

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Received 25 September 2023 | Accepted 10 October 2023 |
Published online 29 December 2023

Abstract

In this Philological Conversation, Dilip M. Menon dwells on the questions of how to think concepts and theorize from the Global South and on writing history beyond the Eurocentric, colonial, nationalist, and terrestrial. We discuss the political and epistemic implications and consequences of such urgent tasks. Dilip M. Menon speaks about his affinities with Edward Said, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Walter Benjamin, among others, and reflects on the themes of coloniality of knowledge, postcoloniality, decoloniality, oceanic history, and the idea of paracoloniality. He links his earlier works to his recent decolonial intellectual projects and discusses his intellectual formation and his practice as a historian and social theorist. Put together via e-mail exchanges, this conversation is a culmination of several in-person conversations that took place in Beirut, Delhi and Berlin. One only hopes for many more to come.

Keywords

decolonisation of knowledge – intellectual/conceptual history – historiography – multiple temporalities – theoretical traditions – coloniality – paracolony – Global South – language

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: Dear Dilip, thank you very much for graciously accepting to take part in this conversation. Allow me to begin with a question about *beginning*, a question you have been recently engaging with. What is it to begin? I would like to pose this question in two senses: first, how and where does one begin when one thinks about making a narrative out of one's inventory of an intellectual history? This would give us a space to learn more about your intellectual formation, especially as connected to your discipline of history. For instance, what drew you to history as a discipline? Second, considering your latest projects of thinking with the ocean beyond the national and terrestrial historical narratives, and thinking concepts from the Global South, my question is, what is it to begin such enterprises? And to be more concrete, at what historical, intellectual and ideological conjunctures/contexts do you begin to think and write about such projects?

Dilip M. Menon: For me, the question of beginning implies the question of beginning again. To begin again is to stand apart from the idea of tradition and of continuity as much as to engage with what Benjamin has called *jetztzeit*—now-time. The exigencies and demands of the present require one to fabricate and invent new protocols and vocabularies, to make a break as it were. However, it also requires one to recognise that within the past with which one has an affinity, as Benjamin reminds us. It is to stand apart from one's location in a perceived flow of homogeneous empty time, and to appropriate moments from the past that address the urgency of the present. As Edward Said points out in his brilliant monograph, *Beginnings*, Auerbach's choice of the idea of the point of departure (“*Ansatzpunkt*”) as opposed to the idea of beginning, poses the dilemma at the heart of what you have asked: What is it to begin?¹

The narratives that we create about beginning possess a tendentious character that cannot be escaped. And there is not a little conceit attached to the idea of departure.

My current obsession with producing categories from the intellectual traditions of Asia and Africa stems from the need to recover as it were from the

¹ See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta Books, 2012), 68–69.

'colonial wound,' as Maria Lugones puts it,² and from the fact that we live 'after amnesia,' as Ganesh Devy argues.³ We, in the Global South, write our narratives through histories that come from elsewhere, as Tagore plangently observed in the first decades of the twentieth century. These invocations of wounds and amnesia are not merely inflammatory. One of the inheritances of colonialism is that we live with an abbreviated sense of time in which the category of the modern becomes the obscure object of our desire. Modernity has a temporality of a few hundred years, and our understanding of the genealogy of the present stretches back only to the violent disruption caused by the incursion of a Western/European modality of thinking. Thus, we understand ourselves in the distorting mirror that Europe presents to us in the fairground of modernity. To begin, to depart, entails an engagement with a deeper temporality and wider resources of knowledge in the project of the recovery of the self as Ashis Nandy put it.⁴ But here lies the rub. Colonialism was about a traducement of forms of intellection and inquiry in colonised societies, the experience of defeat was connected with an attachment to forms of outmoded knowledge. So there is no easy return possible, to begin again is not to return: there is no there, there.

So the conceit of departure entails two moves. One is the recognition of that inheritance of loss and amnesia, which does not allow for a mere waking up to the fact of it, as it were, and moving on. The second is to ask what does the recovery of self entail? For instance, in India, is it possible to simply return to the texts of classical philosophy and mine them for the recreation of an indigenous landscape of thought that existed prior to the colonial? To pose this question is at the same time to recognise that in the present, we have become unfamiliar with and uprooted from ways of reading (not just the knowledge of Sanskrit, for example) and interpretation that rested within traditions of conversation, commentary, and criticism. To begin again involves a going back and a process of remembering and learning to engage with what has become an alien landscape given the structures of pedagogy and history that have created the narrative of the modern and its genealogies.

Another move might be to depart, to recognise one's mixed intellectual inheritance—an awareness, as through a glass darkly, of multiple traditions of intellection that require an engagement with the question of language as well as conceptual frames that have become unfamiliar.

2 See María Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism,' *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 750.

3 G. N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1995).

4 Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, 2nd ed., 4th impr. Oxford India Paperbacks (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

And that departure would entail not a search for continuity, but asking questions from the unequal, hierarchical present of the past as a possible resource. Most of what goes by the name of political theory in the Global South is a rendition of Euro-American thought and its trajectories (what Sudipto Kaviraj has called “Euronormality”).⁵ This leads to the peculiar predicament of perceiving politics in our spaces as inadequate versions of what happens elsewhere: failed states, lack of civil society, patronage over merit and so on. The question of how to think and theorize from the actual politics of our spaces is one that is not raised except in a mode of despair. However, given the exigencies of the present—which are global as in the rise of authoritarian populism in India, the USA and Europe—, we need to ask how to understand the landscape of the present through studying politics in the vernacular as it were. This would entail an engagement with practices, ideas, common sense, and categories of the political in the demotic register as well as an engagement with the idea of what the political may mean in our spaces. Does it exist as a distinct and separate realm apart from self, ethics and community, for example?

So we need a beginning that is a beginning, an engagement with the landscape of concepts and practices at hand. And we would need a beginning that is a departure, a delinking (to use Samir Amin’s terminology) from a dependence on Euro-American theory to understand our present.⁶

As for my own practice as a historian, it was precisely some of the positions stated above that led me to the discipline governed as it is by particular ideas of space (nation states) and time (the periodization principle). These two ideas come together in the creation of that ideal space-time—that of the nation-state—which underlies all history writing. Writing modern history in our spaces has meant a retelling of the story of colonialism, nationalism and the triumph of the liberatory forces. All other narratives get subordinated to this meta-narrative, and regions as much as people who may have had their reservations about a majoritarian nationalism find no place in the hagiography of nationalist endeavour. I come from Kerala, the southwestern state of India, where the resolution of caste inequality was seen as the central faultline. Indian Nationalism was characterised by a conservative politics, as in the case of Gandhi, that swept internal hierarchies and violence under the carpet in the interest of a greater unity. Ten years after India became independent in 1947, Kerala became the first region to elect a communist government to power. In the mainstream syllabi of schools and colleges, the histories of spaces like

5 See Sudipto Kaviraj, “Marxism in Translation: Critical Reflections on Indian Radical Thought,” in *Political Judgement*, ed. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 172–200.

6 Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1990).

Kerala were never taught when I was young; largely because they could not be fitted into the story of an insurgent nationalism. Becoming a historian was a way of entering the question of the absence of Kerala from the master narrative of Indian history.

The emergence of the Subaltern Studies School in the 1980s allowed for a conceptualization of the excluded and the subordinate, whether classes of people or entire regions. However, like most postcolonial theory, there was little attempt to address a landscape of either concepts or histories at hand. Subaltern intellection, theorizing from indigenous knowledge, all of these were subordinated to manoeuvring for a space within the Euro-American episteme. Subaltern Studies was a coming together of German Idealism, British Marxism and French Poststructuralism, as a wag observed. This was a project that thought less with the question of beginnings, and was more about putting new histories within old trajectories as it were. If there had been a triumphant nationalist narrative earlier, now it became a narrative of a bourgeoisie that had failed to come into its own. The casting in explicitly Marxist terms (inflected by Gramsci) meant that caste and indigenous notions of politics were given short shrift. So, for me, to begin necessitated a set of departures not the least of which was to engage with local hierarchies and subaltern intellection about how to resolve inequality.

What became clear to me as I researched was the shadow of Euronormality writ large even over radical history writing. The concentration on the emergence of the state (and challenges to the colonial state, this time by subalterns rather than elites) meant that the terrestrial and the agrarian were the dominant themes. It became clear to me that an engagement with the ocean and the maritime allowed one to transcend a short temporality. One could think with millenia of trade, migration, and flows of religion allowing the disruption of the space-time of conventional history writing (in which even radical enterprises like Subaltern Studies participated).

The space of the ocean summoned up geographies and histories that resisted the lure of state formation and forced one to think transnationally about the miscegenated spaces of the maritime. That Kerala had been connected to the Roman Empire in the early centuries of the Christian Era through the trade in pepper, and to China through oceanic and coastal trade in rice meant a rethinking of the myopia of a nation-state geography. Apart from this was the fact that the ocean provided for many groups an escape from the hierarchies on land and social mobility through the proceeds of labour and trade. It broadened the history of the subaltern beyond the national and the well-worn trope of the struggle between colonialism and nationalism. There were other histories, and other geographies, far vaster and more emancipatory, that one needed to engage with.

All of this is related to historical conjunctures, because to go back to Benjamin, one reaches back to memories in the past in a moment of present danger. As Hindu fundamentalism seeks to fashion India as a Hindu state, there is an increasing obsession with national glory and hard borders; an ideology that fears the possibilities of the ocean. At the same time, there is an attempt to jettison the idea of influence and imagine a hermetic space of indigenous thought which was always already conceptually mature. There is little reflection on the fundamental hierarchies and exclusions that undergird traditional civilizational modes of thinking. This necessitates a rethinking of space as much as knowledge and of generating categories to address the urgencies of the present. There can be no return to the tired tropes of Euro-American thought nor an appeal to some pristine national ideology. One has to depart to begin again.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: Could you speak a bit about your experience of being educated in India? Reflecting back on it, how would you describe this experience? What prompted you to move to Cambridge for your PhD? Tell us more about your experience at Cambridge. How would you describe the cultural, political, intellectual and ideological environment back then, both in the UK and India?

Dilip M. Menon: There is not much to recall about schooling in India since I studied indifferent textbooks and was taught in the main by indifferent teachers. However, the period of internal emergency, declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between 1975–77, happened when I was in eighth grade and when I went up to University in 1980, there was a charged political and intellectual atmosphere. The period of the emergency had helped remove the sheen from nationalism and there was an increasing perception that the glorified dyad of the nation-state could be an oppressive one as well. Questions of civil liberties, of the devastation caused by a singleminded commitment to the idea of Development, and of reengaging with the legacy of nationalism came to the fore. In an important sense, Subaltern Studies too came out of the crucible of the Emergency—and Gyanendra Pandey, a member of the collective, acknowledges this.

The break with the nationalist paradigm of history writing that culminated with the achievement of the independent Indian state was consequential for the writing of history. The interdisciplinary revolution of the 1980s where the discipline of history began to engage with anthropology and literature (E.P. Thompson, Keith Thomas, Hans Medick, Carlo Ginzburg, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Roger Chartier, Natalie Zemon Davis, Raphael Samuel and the

History Workshop) found an immediate resonance in the political situation of India. At the same time, there was the search for a new paradigm and for ways of reading the colonial archive manifested magnificently in Ranajit Guha and Shahid Amin's resort to French poststructuralism to read the colonial archive as ideology. These academic developments went alongside the growth of the feminist movement, the antinuclear movement, the environmental movement, and the first expressions of a dalit politics. Those of us who had opted for history as a vocation, read widely, debated nationalist shibboleths, and thought with the world at large.

The decision to move to England was largely made because I fortuitously got a fully paid scholarship to Oxford. After the intellectual ferment of Delhi, Oxford was a quiet backwater, untouched by the interdisciplinary and transnational transformations of the discipline. I wanted to work on popular culture and was therefore allotted a supervisor each from History and Anthropology! However, there were stellar intellects in other disciplines like Francis Haskell, the art historian; Amartya Sen and Ronald Dworkin; the literary critic Terry Eagleton; the inimitable and colourful Richard Cobb; and a small feminist history circle led by Lyndal Roper. I moved to Cambridge for my PhD where beside the conservative cast of the department, there were evening seminars particularly the one hosted by Peter Burke at Clare that brought in the practitioners of the new history from the continent and the USA. At the time, building upon the critique by Talal Asad of the colonial moorings of anthropology, the volume *Writing Culture* had come out and rocked the conservative "Arch. and Anth." department.⁷ Edward Said visited and delivered lectures from what was to become his great book *Culture and Imperialism*.⁸ And between 1989–92, the fall of the Wall and the political and intellectual churning in eastern Europe meant that intellectuals like Vaclav Havel and others became regular visitors. It was an exciting decade and with the fall of apartheid, intellectuals and artists from South Africa came to speak to packed halls; I remember Albie Sachs in particular and his quiet engagement with the power of law to trump tyranny. These invocations of human freedom and the engagement with questions of equality were not merely theoretical: we saw a world change before our eyes.

At the same time, England was an inhospitable place for people of colour. Thatcherite politics gutted the very idea of the social, and there was an

7 James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. A School of American Research Advanced Seminar (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 141–64.

8 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* [reprinted] (London: Vintage, 1994), 35.

increasing resentment towards people of colour in a devastated economic and cultural landscape. Looking back, it almost seems like the idea of Brexit was immanent, as Britain struggled with its loss of status in the world and dreams of past imperial glory were all that were left as consolation. After completing my PhD and a tenure as a Research Fellow, I returned to an India where Hindu fundamentalism had reared its head leading to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992. This was a watershed for our generation, just as the Emergency had been for a previous one. The rallying around the idea of a Hindu nation with its marginalization of the Muslim and the occlusion of the issue of caste violence again brought home the dangers of an unreconstructed nationalism. The rabid majoritarianism around me meant that my work began engaging with questions of inequality, caste, and the blindness of insight occasioned by the then dominant Marxist paradigm in academic circles, in which ascriptive categories like caste were subordinated to questions of class. The inability of a liberal-left class to engage with questions of religion and caste demanded a radical shift in thinking which for many of us came to be associated with voluntary outreach to schools and working with local groups. However, it was the engagement with caste that led to an exploration of other paradigms of thinking and engaging with the unrealised dream of fraternity in India as B.R. Ambedkar plangently argued.⁹

Stints of teaching in Kerala and Hyderabad made clear that while thinking beyond the paradigm of the nation-state I also had to work with an idea of subaltern cosmopolitanism occasioned by the migration of lower caste groups across the ocean in search of work and social mobility. Alongside the terrestrial politics of nationalism, there was also the exploration by subaltern groups, religious figures, exiles, and dissidents of an oceanic space of freedom and movement. And coming from Kerala, I was reminded of my own myopia regarding the ocean, so there and yet not-there, as it were. I began to see that the land based historiography of Kerala—concentrating on the landlord, temple, and dominant households—arose from an upper caste Hindu imagination that excluded the Muslims, Christians and Jews, as well as the fisherpeople, sailors and merchants from the historical imagination of the region. I understand now that there was quite some presentism in my understanding of historiography, since the rising tide of Hindutva seemed to throw into relief the absences and occlusions of social science practice.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: Can we view your geographical shift to South Africa as a shift in the landscape of thinking as well?

9 B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, annotated critical edition (London: Verso, 2014).

Dilip M. Menon: The move to South Africa was in many senses not part of a plan, but in retrospect it appears that there was a trajectory that led here. In my years in England, the fight against apartheid and nuclear disarmament were the main political agendas in the public sphere. Apart from the ongoing demonstrations in Trafalgar Square outside the South African High Commission, in some of which I participated, there were also a few black students from South Africa who spoke about the terrible landscape that they had left. When I was invited to set up a Centre for Indian Studies at the University of Witwatersrand, with funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, I accepted out of a mixture of romantic as much as political motives. South Africa, in 2009, still had the political and intellectual energy of the anti-apartheid movement, and it was humbling as well as challenging to work with those who had sustained the idea of freedom in the academy through dark times. I began to engage with a larger horizon of thinking—Africa, the Arab world, Latin America and the Caribbean—motivated by the ongoing intellectual struggle to find a paradigm of knowledge not subordinate to the colonial and the Euro-American. This issue of intellectual decolonization was raised sharply by the student agitations of 2015–16: #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #Decoloniseeducation.

The students threw down the challenge to an older generation that there still remained intellectual work to be done to disengage from a colonial paradigm of education. This was both a bracing as well as a fraught encounter. For a while, the University became a space in which intellectual challenges sat alongside *ad hominem* accusations of bad faith. But as Mao observed, a revolution is not a tea party! Once the polemical dust had settled, there was a substantial revision of the syllabi, of the protocols of pedagogy, and a renewed commitment to engage with the native languages apart from English. This was the beginning of the Changing Theory conference project as much as the Theory from Africa workshops in which we not only began to engage with wider geographies but a newer generation. The Changing Theory conferences brought together over twenty-odd scholars working with sixteen languages around a simple remit. Instead of falling back on tradition and classical modes of philosophy, the contributors were challenged to take a word from a language that they worked with and elaborate on its conceptual significance. It was both a beginning and a departure.

At the same time, this turn to the Global South allowed for a new engagement with the ocean as the space of the flow of ideas as well as an emerging horizon of thinking. It was possible to see, for example, that the convening of the Bandung Conference in 1955 was the culmination of earlier histories of trade, migration, and the circulation of religious ideas across the Indian Ocean. Alongside the currents of oceanic trade was also the world of Indian Ocean

Islam and the Arabic cosmopolis. It was very clear, for example, that a line ran from Cape Town via Kerala to Malacca as a result of the Dutch East Indian Company's operations.

Of course, there was also the exigent question of global warming and the rising of the sea levels which required a move away from anthropocentric forms of thinking to a better understanding of the humanimal and nature.¹⁰ My initial essay on Ocean as Method tried to think through a new paradigm that could bring together art, migration, history and climate change, while attempting to think beyond the tired triad of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. If one were not to fall into the trap of seeing all of "modern" history as tied to the colonial, one had to think with heterogeneous and parallel times, with an idea of the paracolonial; a time that preceded, sat alongside, and exceeded the colonial.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: You begin your recent book *Changing Theory* with an emphatic statement: "Euro-American theory provides our existing academic interpretations of the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change them."¹¹ The book directs attention to a more constructive enterprise: to work with other categories/forms of knowledge beyond the telos of Euro-American theory, history and historiography. This kind of project is marked by three significant tenets: first, to work against amnesia; second, to take one's life-world and location of intellection seriously; third, to move beyond critiquing Euro-American knowledge and think about its irrelevance in one's location. In your own words, "[o]vercoming amnesia and developing a sense of thinking from a place is central to the work of theory. We need to move away from merely critiquing the shortcomings, prejudices, and occlusions of a theory that comes from elsewhere and move robustly toward recognizing its possible obsolescence or irrelevance for our concerns."¹² This is "a moment of arrival."¹³ Why do you see this project as an urgent one and what is its political relevance in our times? Given the various approaches to decolonize knowledge, what is your appraisal of these various projects? What are the issues at stake in the project of decolonizing knowledge?

10 See Dilip M. Menon, "Walking on Water: Globalization and History," *Global Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (May 11, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2020.12176>.

11 Dilip M. Menon, "Changing Theory: Thinking Concepts from the Global South," in *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South* (Abingdon; New York [NY]: Routledge, 2022), 1.

12 Menon, "Changing Theory," 7.

13 Menon, "Changing Theory," 4.

Dilip M. Menon: This desire to renew and reorient the idea of theory is not new and has been with us at least since Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o talked about decolonizing knowledge, or Ashis Nandy spoke about the recovery of self after colonialism.¹⁴ However, given the political economy of knowledge and the dominance of English as an academic language, original thinking from elsewhere in other languages finds it hard to gain purchase. In the field of literature, contingent circumstances like changing fashions in the market have meant that literature from Albania to South Korea and Syria is now available in English and can be in contention for value within the space of world literature. In the academic space, Chinese philosophers and political theorists are gaining traction through translations from major American university presses, largely because of American paranoia about the Chinese “threat.” Know thy enemy is the watchword. Postcolonial theory participated in this paradigm of theorizing in English and speaking to the Western academy, as we see in the works of Bhabha, Spivak, Chakrabarty and others. Chakrabarty put it precisely as an engagement with the gifts of the Enlightenment (in all its Eurocentric singularity; as if there were no other intellectual traditions available to think freedom and being).¹⁵ Euro-American theory and the Enlightenment have been the *pharmakon*, to use Derrida’s reading—both cure and poison at the same time.

So what do we need to do to theorize afresh and depart from the prison-house of colonial knowledge which defined not only what is Human but also what is Thought itself? It is possible to return, as it were, to some idea of the classical; of a Hindu, Islamic, Chinese body of philosophizing about mind, being, the ethical, the political etc. This has its dangers in that there is the unquestioned assumption that thinking about the world today can be done from a paradigm that was located in a particular universe of questions. And we do know that colonialism instituted a break with these traditions of thinking, transformed them and removed them from the contemporary life of the mind. There has been work done for example on the *mīmamsā*¹⁶ school of philosophy in eastern India, and how philosophers from this tradition were suborned to the colonial enterprise of law making; instrumentalism came to triumph over

14 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: J. Currey / Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya et al., 1986); Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*.

15 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton Studies in Culture / Power / History (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton University Press, 2007).

16 *Mīmamsā* literally means “reflection” in Sanskrit and refers to the textual analysis of the Vedic Scriptures, see John A. Taber, “Mīmāṃsā,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780415249126-F008-1>.

nuance and context. There is no easy return possible. We have to work with the colonial caesura and also reckon with the loss of contemporaneity of much of our traditions of thinking. While it is possible for a contemporary European philosopher to cite Plato, Augustine, and Levinas on one page, this artifice of continuity has been made possible by years of commentary, citation and annotation as much as by the presumption of an idea of a tradition. The colonial caesura means that it is difficult for us to see Ibn Khaldūn, Anandavardhana or Confucius as our contemporaries in the same sense.

So there is work to be done in this moment of arrival, after the exhaustion of a mere critique of Eurocentrism etc. which has not begun the task of excavation, discovery and interpretation of what we see as our intellectual inheritance. There is no easy relation possible, and learning a language—Sanskrit or Arabic—is not enough. One has to find a way into modes of thinking and imagining with which we have lost a connection. Another mode which is not that of return, but of departure and beginning again, is an engagement with the conceptual universe in our lifeworlds and languages. *Changing Theory* worked with this idea, asking scholars across disciplines to think with words in the languages that they worked with which had a circulatory potency in the everyday reckoning of space-time and self. This is a strategy that allows an escape from the burden of amnesia and allows an engagement with the present and the symptoms of the present. This is what I call a demotic theorizing, taking words from the “mouths of people” rather than the dictionary as Mikhail Bakhtin memorably put it.¹⁷

This is an urgent project largely because the earlier postcolonial mode of using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, as Audre Lorde put it, has run out of steam.¹⁸ Again, there is the exigency of the present political situation in which religious populism and chauvinism claim the idea of tradition for themselves and recuperate “timeless civilizational truths” which efface the hierarchies and inequalities of the present. We live now in a time of misappropriated concepts and words and there is a need to join battle to recover spaces of critical thinking. This requires us to think with our languages and the conceptual universe that they create, and to move away from appropriating theories from elsewhere, while at the same time wrestling with the production of meaning and a critical attitude towards inherited habits of thought.

17 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 294.

18 Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, Penguin Modern 23 (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

The project of decolonizing knowledge here is not a knee-jerk rejection of the “West” as for example Hindu fundamentalists are doing in India. It is to understand that we have to think alongside this inheritance, that is our “intimate enemy,”¹⁹ to use Nandy’s phrase, and to invent afresh a vocabulary of critical thinking rooted in the life and language of the people. We are in the position of having to think alongside concepts that come from elsewhere as well as concepts from our spaces that seek to entrench a majoritarian idea of belonging and exclusion. It is an anticolonial and, at the same time, an anti-indigenist position. Hence the turn to the space of the demotic, everyday words that create their own worlds of discussion and identity, an intellectual enterprise that moves from the streets to the study and back again.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: I would like us to dwell a bit more on the question of theory and ask: What is it to theorize?

Dilip M. Menon: To theorize is not to seek belonging in and establishing a continuity within an existing tradition. In the case of attempts to recover an indigenous mode of authenticity, there is no there, there. And in the case of Euro-American theory, with its abbreviated time of “modernity,” it is possible that its questions are not our questions. Second, to theorize is to engage with the filiations between the everyday and the realm of intellection; theory has to be rooted in the crucible of contention in the present. And third, to theorize is also to reconnect to the past differently, it’s the Benjaminian reaching back urgently to the past in a moment of danger. It reconfigures the past through commentary, and establishes bridges to address the amnesia wrought by the colonial caesura.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: On the one hand, there is an invitation to think with the plurality of world languages and on the other, one writes in English. A multi-layered process of translation with all its gains and losses is involved here. How do we approach the question of language and translation when theorizing in this moment of arrival?

Dilip M. Menon: One’s relation to language has to be pragmatic: language is as language does. I can think of no better answer to this than that of Chinua Achebe in the great debate of the 1960s about the language of literature in decolonized Africa. As he observed in 1965,

19 Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*.

So my answer to the question, “Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?” is certainly, “Yes.” If on the other hand you ask, “Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?” I should say, “I hope not.” It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use.²⁰

So one writes in English to communicate both with those for whom English is the only language they know, as well as those from the Global South for whom English is one of the languages that they know.

Your question also raises the issue as to what is lost in writing in English and the obvious knee-jerk response could be the loss of cultural nuance, a flattening of meaning in search of commensurability and so on. But even in a conversation between two people possessing linguistic competence, speaking in the same language, be it Bengali or Arabic, there has to be hard and contentious engagement if nuance is not to be lost. It is more a question of patient engagement with nuance and registers of language that is required whether one is speaking in one’s own language or translating. We resort to the artifice of indicating a word in italics to show that there is something that cannot be fully rendered; suggesting a degree of opacity which the words used in English can only hint at. However, we have to theorize the practice of italicization; do theory in italics as it were. Here is where we begin to engage with the question of untranslatability not as an ultimate problem of rendering meaning, but rather, a temporal problem of a provisional rendition. One writes in the hope of clarity and as Valéry observed of his poems, one could say that a translation is never finished, it is only abandoned.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: You warn, alongside Édouard Glissant and Barbara Cassin, against the tendencies to see language and difference as always transparent and translatable.²¹ Between the incommensurability and commensurability of language and thought, how can we engage the possibility of political solidarity?

20 Chinua Achebe, “The African Writer and the English Language,” in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Garden City [NY]: Anchor Press, 1976), 82.

21 See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); especially Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *Poetics of Relation*, 189–94; also see Emily S. Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London; New York: Verso, 2013); Barbara Cassin, Steven Rendall, and Emily S. Apter, eds., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

Dilip M. Menon: This is an important question, because it moves the practice of thinking beyond the space of reading and writing to the filiation with political dialogue and the building and consolidation of affinities. One has to reach beyond the realm of language to acting in the world. Here again, we have to understand politics as a contest over meanings and the life of words in the world. As we know, the articulation of the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity has spawned emancipatory as much as authoritarian visions and practices. The coming up against the hardness of the world bends language as much as it refracts it. And political solidarity has never been forged within an utter clarity of meaning, but rather in the crucible of contention over, misrecognition of, and idiosyncratic interpretation of the range of possibilities that a word offers. This is most evident, as Ajay Skaria's filigreed thinking on Gandhi has taught us, in Gandhi's movement between Gujarati and English as he translates his own words.²² There are invented words like *satyagraha*, that Gandhi populates with his own intentions; translations like *sudhaaro* of the word civilization, which indicates a process of reform and purification rather than an inheritance; and of course, his apodictic readings of sacred texts in order to bend them to the task of generating political solidarity. The dejection of incommensurability can cripple the political imagination just as much as the desire for commensurability can render political thinking facile.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: The concepts the book presents range from thinking about self, community, animal-human relationship, political solidarity to historiography and so on, all, as I see them, indicative of attention to context—geographic and epistemic—and to the political economy in which these concepts are located and articulated. While you invite us to acknowledge the enduring colonial relations and the different political economies within which one works in the Global South, you caution: “This means too that we cannot think about the South as a *merely* theoretical space, leading us to verbal prestidigitation like North of the South, South of the North, and so on—Detroit as South in the United States, Johannesburg as North in Africa.”²³ Why are you cautious of this “verbal prestidigitation” and of reducing the south to a theoretical locus of enunciation? And is it possible to understand the political economy as un-imbricated in the prevailing epistemic order?

22 See Ajay Skaria, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance*, Cultural Critique Books (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

23 Menon, “Changing Theory,” 3.

Dilip M. Menon: There are several different questions here. The first is the question of the context of enunciation and the landscape of meaning. Each of these words is located in a linguistic universe—of a group of languages, of a particular geography. For instance, the essay on the Urdu/Hindustani word *awqat* (status) addresses its changing meanings within northern India from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century.²⁴ However, the word is found also in the universe of Arabic and Persian so it is part of a wider cosmopolis of meaning. Similarly with the word *musafir* (traveller) which resonates across Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Swahili, and Persian.²⁵ Or Mandarin words like *minzu* (the people) which carry meaning across East and South East Asia.²⁶ So the context of elaboration is local but the resonances carry across wider communities of language, which allows us to reflect on questions like particularism and universalism. Every language projects a universal; arguably Arabic, Tamil, English, French etc. speak to communities of meaning across very wide geographies. As of 2022, the French-speaking community worldwide is about 270 million, while Arabic is about 375 million and only 360 million speak English as their first language. Of course, English as a lingua Franca is spoken by over a billion people.

The question of what I call the prestidigitation involved in rendering an idea like the Global South vacuous by speaking of the south in the north and the north in the south etc. is a political one. Ideas like the Global South, or the Third World, or non-alignment speak about a geography of affective affinity arising from experiences like colonialism, of postcolonial worldmaking, of travel, trade, migration etc. These are not categories of experience for those living in Europe or America so they tend to see these as abstract categories at best, or confrontational categories at worst. For example, American academics see ideas such as non-alignment through the lens of the Cold War and the American idea of either you are with us or against us. Hence a hostility towards these terms which works with basic criticisms like the Global South is fractured by ideas of race, class etc. This is true for the United States as a nation, or the EU as a community, or for any larger geographical/conceptual category. The other strategy is the disembedding of a category from its web of affinities to denature it, as in propositions like Detroit is the Global South of the USA and so on. This is risible both as theorizing or as intellectual strategy. As you rightly say, these jejune critiques or elaborations from Euramerica are a function of

24 See Francesca Orsini, "Awqāt/Aukāt," in *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South*, ed. Dilip M. Menon, Transdisciplinary Souths (Abingdon; New York [NY]: Routledge, 2022), 234–46.

25 See Mahvish Ahmad, "Musāfir," in *Changing Theory*, 325–36.

26 See Saul Thomas, "Minzu," in *Changing Theory*, 127–41.

the political economy of academic production wherein only theories arising from Euro-American spaces have intellectual legitimacy.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: In *Changing Theory*, you aptly state, “[f]or too long we have thought with the trajectories of a European history and its self-regarding nativist epistemology that was rendered universal largely through the violence and conquest of empire. As the aphorism goes, a language is a dialect backed by an army.”²⁷ I would like to think about the (dis)continuities between your earlier work and your recent research engagements. In your first book *Caste, Nationalism, and Communism in South India* that focuses on the Malabar region in Kerala, there is a problematization of the ways in which communism is thought. The book challenges the idea of thinking the formation of communism in India minus the role of religion (or religious spaces) as a theoretical category and as a lived experience.²⁸ In *The Blindness of Insight*, you further point to the blind spot of thinking religious violence or “communalism” in India without engaging caste as structuring concept not only afflicting the social life of various communities in India but also afflicting the relationship among these communities. You point to a curious phenomenon where Dalits are posed as the internal enemy of the caste system, while Muslims are taken as the external enemy.²⁹ In this book, and also in many other works of yours, there is an engagement with a kind of historiography that is not often taken as a body of historical knowledge. Given your current preoccupations, culminating in your recent books *Changing theory* and *Ocean as Method*,³⁰ one can sense a latent impetus to think otherwise, against the dominant culture of scholarship that is Eurocentric, terrestrial or nationalist in nature, especially in history writing. If I want to mark the (dis)continuities that characterise your thought in order to demonstrate its enduring character, I would like to ask you what you think you have retained and/or surpassed in light of your recent scholarship?

Dilip M. Menon: I like to think of myself as a problem-oriented historian, concerned with the elisions, habits of thought, and conventionalities that make up a disciplinary practice. Studying communism in southern India, I tried to show that communism was successful for two reasons. One, that it was not

27 Menon, “Changing Theory,” 5.

28 Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900–1948*, Cambridge South Asian Studies 55 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

29 Dilip M. Menon, *The Blindness of Insight: Essays on Caste in Modern India*, Other Headings (Pondicherry; New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2006).

30 Dilip M. Menon et al., *Ocean as Method: Thinking with the Maritime* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2022).

governed by an idea of Marxist theory or practice and transformed itself into a programme of caste egalitarianism. And second, that nationalism may not have been the dominant ideology in India, given the inherent conservatism of a Gandhian politics. Similarly, when I engaged with the sophisticated literature on religious violence in India, the question for me was why was there a more nuanced literature on religious violence rather than on caste violence, arguably the persistent low-grade fever that afflicts the nation. The experience of the Partition of India in 1947 may have dictated this (a never again kind of argument), or indeed it could have been that India's academic scene is dominated by Brahmins and upper castes for whom caste was not an experiential issue. Whatever the case may be, the issue for me was that religious violence and caste hierarchy were Siamese twins and needed to be studied together.

As you have pointed out insightfully, the search for aporia and occlusions meant a trawling wide across film, literature, the arts and so on. A critique had to engage with what Bourdieu called the phenomenon of things going without saying because they came without saying, i.e., the habitus of a disciplinary formation. The turn to the sea arose because of the simple fact that while Kerala, the state from which I come, is a coastal state, its historical and literary imaginary was terrestrial. Was it a case reflecting Borges's intriguing observation that there are no camels in the Koran?³¹ The very there-ness, as it were, that invisibilizes a phenomenon? Arguably, here again, we are contending with structures of power and the habits of thinking of the dominant. A terrestrial history centred on land, temples and kings was in effect an upper caste Hindu history that ignored the lives of the fisherpeople, traders, and communities such as the Jews, Muslims and Syrian Christians who came from across the ocean. It also ignored the route of the ocean as a space for social and economic mobility for subaltern groups; indeed it was this that made the sea a threatening presence.

With regard to the question of the theory informing social science in India, the structures of pedagogy in the India of the 1980s, when I was a student, were largely Marxist; a subordination of actual histories to ideal trajectories from elsewhere; what Sudipto Kaviraj called the rule of "Euronormality." This was accompanied by the thinking of Theory in upper case and a constant search for work emerging from Europe in order to understand local situations. Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, Badiou and standing behind them Hegel and Heidegger. This led the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha to adapt Metternich's barb that when France catches a cold, India sneezes.

31 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," in *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–1986*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2001), 423.

Postcolonial theory was the performance by Indian intellectuals of European theory and hence was well received in the US and Europe. Ganesh Devy in the 1990s raised the point that in colonized societies, intellectuals were living after amnesia; they had little knowledge of, or relation to indigenous intellection in philosophy, law, epistemology and so on. This is what led me to think with what it would mean to think about a social theory from our spaces; “our” indicating spaces that had suffered the epistemicide (de Sousa Santos)³² as much as occlusion that accompanied colonialism.

I would argue for a basic continuity in the way that I think; an adherence to the Benjaminian dictum: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”³³ Intellectual colonialism is alive and well, hence my affinity with the scholars who call for decoloniality.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: When it comes to the question of history writing, it seems that Walter Benjamin remains a lasting interlocutor in your thought. I want us to dwell more on the question of thinking and generating concepts in relation to temporality—while one thinks with what Benjamin terms *jetztzeit*, a “now-time” as a way to create “a critical present that draws upon History as a resource”³⁴ and thus the past remains unfinished and open, there is also an equal attention in your work, if I construe that correctly, to locating concepts and historical events, to thinking with the conditions that made such concepts and histories possible. Do you see any tension between this double move? How could one think with this multitude of temporalities/times, within various, sometimes competing, historical/present locations?

Dilip M. Menon: Benjamin and his aphoristic and gnomic prose has been an inspiration since my days as a graduate student and I have always turned to his disruption of what appears to be the anodyne presence of a homogenous, empty time. That history is not a flow, that it is made by an urgent reaching back to the past from the present in a moment of danger expresses for me, better than anyone else has, the vocation of a historian. That the present is not just a place marker in the triad of past, present, and future; that one has

32 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).

33 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 247.

34 Dilip M. Menon, “Writing History in Colonial Times: Polemic and the Recovery of Self in Late Nineteenth-Century South India,” *History and Theory* 54, no. 4 (2015): 82.

to constitute the present as the space of intellectual and political struggle is what is inherent in the idea of *jetztzeit* or now time. The task of historical writing is to not merely look back at the wreckage of the past (as with the Angel of History), but to see the past as a resource to rebuild. Hence, the past is never over; it remains open to the urgent call of the present. Implicit in this is my personal irritation with the triad of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial which hinges all time on the colonial, while being complicit with an unreflective linearity. Each moment is a concatenation of times, and time has to be engaged with in its heterogeneity. Hence, I like to think with the idea of paracoloniaity, which retains the violent time of coloniality but also suggests the multiple other times that are lived and experienced beside it. Hence the attempt to think oceanic time alongside terrestrial time. A resonant example of this can be seen in the Malayali literary critic Balakrishna Pillai's historical essays of the 1930s. He begins his history of Kerala in Rome reflecting the millennium-long trade in pepper between the southwest coast of India and the Roman Empire. This disruption of space-time is effected in his literary essays where he puts the idea of world literature alongside the narrow space of British literature in the colonial period. Here again, we have to think beyond linearity and impoverished ideas of the local against the universal. We have to reckon with multiple projections of universalism; needless to add, every space connects with a cosmos. The only reason why European particularism was for a while able to impose its vision of the universal was through the effective use of violence in the colonial period and the domination of the political economy of intellectual production in our present.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: I find your idea of paracoloniaity helpful in unsettling (but not ignoring of course) coloniality/colonialism as the master point of historical reference, a reference that uncovers as much as it buries the plurality of other temporalities and histories. Could you speak more about paracoloniaity? How have you begun to think with this concept and what are the avenues of historical inquiry it opens?

Dilip M. Menon: The term paracoloniaity was used in passing by the historian Christopher Bayly, in his unjustly neglected book *Imperial Meridian* (1989), to refer to states like Thailand and Muhammad Ali's Egypt that were not colonized and existed beside the colonial map as it were.³⁵ Stephanie Newell in her work on readerships in colonial West Africa added a theoretical gloss in suggesting

35 C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830*, Studies in Modern History (London; New York: Longman, 1989).

that the term paracolonial helped us to move away from the Eurocentric triad of pre-, colonial, and post-colonial.³⁶ I use this term to think with the notion of heterogenous simultaneities of temporality, so that alongside the political and economic time of the colonial, we are thinking about longer, parallel, and cross-hatching temporalities like the time of Indian Ocean Islam, or indeed the movements of humans and materials across the ocean.³⁷ We are all unreconstructed Hegelians in our adherence to the notion of one time: the time of the colonial, the time of the nation, the time of neoliberalism and so on. Benjamin had warned us that the task of the historian is to reject and work against this naturalization of a homogeneous, empty time. For one, the term paracolonial allows us not to succumb to colonialism's rhetoric of its own domination of space-time. Second, it allows us to think about the persistence of other times—cultural, religious, philosophical—as well as the insubordinate spaces that laugh at imperial hubris. It is interesting to think about the colonial repression of nationalist activity in early-twentieth-century India, that generates a diaspora stretching from Southeast Asia, across Europe to North America which traverses earlier routes of movement of people and ideas. The parallel geography of anticolonial activity that sits alongside the pinkness of the map of Empire is probably the best expression of paracoloniality. As also Engsens Ho's magisterial book *The Graves of Tarim* (2005)³⁸ that studies the movement of religious specialists, traders and political entrepreneurs across the wide swathe of territory from Yemen to Southeast Asia over 500 years that precedes, sits alongside and persists beyond colonial temporality.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: In your article "Writing History in Colonial times" and also in many other works, you question the binary opposition between the textual and the oral and suggest that one should pay more attention to the porous relations between them. This could be seen as a critical response to the latent privilege of the written over the oral; it could further be a move beyond "the archives generated by states and imperial formations, to rethink

36 Stephanie Newell, "'PARACOLONIAL' NETWORKS. Some Speculations on Local Readerships in Colonial West Africa," *Interventions* 3, no. 3 (January 1, 2001): 336–54.

37 See, for example, Mahmood Kooria, *Islamic Law in Circulation: Shafi'i Texts across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Mahmood Kooria and Sanne Ravensbergen, eds., *Islamic Law in the Indian Ocean World: Texts, Ideas, and Practices*, 1st ed., Routledge Series on the Indian Ocean and Trans-Asia (Abingdon; New York [NY]: Routledge, 2021).

38 Engsens Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*, The California World History Library 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

the ocean in history.”³⁹ How can we engage the relation between the oral and written in thinking and theorizing?

Dilip M. Menon: We live in societies where texts are one of many ways of creating, engaging with, and remembering narratives. Texts exist alongside the secular performative—song, theatre, dance—as much as the religious performative—shrine festivals, and remembered verses and stories in praise of deities and folk heroes. Conversations are interspersed with film dialogues and at times, one is part of a film theatre event where the audience knows every bit of dialogue by heart. Texts, unless that is the only form of one’s engagement, are not hermetic and exist in a field of dialogue and contest with other imaginations. Given this fact, it seems either snobbery or lethargy to insist that what is embodied as text has primacy over the crucible from which it emerges and is continuous with. I find de Viveiros de Castro’s idea of a philosophical anthropology very useful in that it respects thought wherever and in whatever form it happens.⁴⁰ As Borges observed, “To think, analyze and invent are not anomalous acts, but the normal respiration of the intelligence.”⁴¹

And you are right that this is also a way of reckoning with the tyranny of the colonial archive, where, to use Audre Lorde’s formulation, we ironically use the tools of the master to try and dismantle the master’s house. We have had insightful critiques of the archive, by Derrida among others, of its exclusions and instabilities. Barthes taught us to read against the grain of the visible, but we need to move beyond the idea of the canon, of authoritative texts, of sanctified traditions, and move towards the demotic. Words, after all, as Bakhtin reminded us, come to us from the mouths of people, not dictionaries. We also need to think with the idea of circulation; that words in everyday conversations move into the realm of public oratory and the political realm, come to be embodied in legislation and in reflections on political theory and find their way back again. It’s the history of this circularity (so well explored by Carlo

39 Dilip M. Menon, “Oceanic Histories: From the Terrestrial to the Maritime,” in *Ocean as Method: Thinking With the Maritime*, ed. Dilip M. Menon, Nishat Zaidi, Saarah Jappie, and Simi Malhotra, 1st ed. (London: Routledge India, 2022), 3.

40 Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, trans. Peter Skafish, 1st ed. (Minneapolis [MN]: Univocal, 2014).

41 Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixot,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition (New York [NY]: Penguin Books, 1998), 95.

Ginzburg in his classic *The Cheese and the Worms*)⁴² that is forgotten in the ossified practice of mere textual engagements.

In my ongoing work on political language in Kerala, I work with words in everyday use which also carry deadly weight when deployed by political parties against their opponents. For instance, the noun *othukkam* and the verb *othukkuka*, carry the meanings of extracting obedience, disciplining, as well as displaying comportment. Women are expected to display *othukkam* or proper feminine comportment within the home, within marriage, as well as the patriarchal public sphere. The ruling Communist Party uses the word in a regulating sense; political enemies as well as dissidents within the organisation are subjected to *othukkam*. In everyday conversation, the word connotes putting away, tidying up etc. The word appears in feminist discourse, in poetry, and in party documents. It is this circulation that excites me; the power of a word in the world, and the worlds that words create. As Bakhtin put it in his essay on time and the chronotope in the novel,

The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers.⁴³

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: In your work there is a constant conversation between different literary, artistic and historical articulations. You engage with aesthetics, literature, cinema and social theory and often engage in transdisciplinary conversation to make theoretical and historical claims. What are the implications of such practice for doing theory and writing history? What are your thoughts on the idea/protocols of disciplines?

Dilip M. Menon: I don't think this is a conscious methodological choice. We, each of us, think with the grain of our being, or so we should! I am a film buff, a child of the Hindi cinema as well as of Godard and Visconti; a jazz and classical music aficionado; a lover of the theatre and the radio. The question before me is how do I bring this to bear on what I write and not succumb to the dreary

42 For a thought-provoking conversation with Carlo Ginzburg, see Islam Dayeh, "Philology and Microhistory: A Conversation with Carlo Ginzburg," *Philological Encounters* 7, no. 1–2 (2022): 197–232.

43 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 254.

regime of academic protocol. If one is a creative thinker and writer, then being interdisciplinary is not a choice, it is just the way one is. A personal hero of mine is Eric Hobsbawm who thought with the world when he wrote his historical works, and also was an acute commentator, under the pseudonym of Francis Newton, on the contemporary jazz scene in Britain. As also James Scott, who has said in interviews that when he sits down to write, he reads Balzac and Austen to remind himself that academic prose can become leaden and insipid.

Mahmoud Al-Zayed: *Changing Theory* seems to be a collective exercise of a certain kind of philology. How do you understand philology and what is its relation to your work in general and particularly to history writing in your own work?

Dilip M. Menon: In his 1973 conversations with Victor Duvakin, Bakhtin declares that he is more a philosopher than a philologist and that his orientation was historical-philological.⁴⁴ I would like to think of my enterprise as being similar, in that looking at words within the world of language and linguistics alone does not excite me. It's the life of words in the world, their contingent, conjunctural and changing meanings that provokes and intrigues me. And if one thinks about the task of philosophy as that of making concepts, then one moves away from the word to its landscape and an engagement with multiple disciplines. If we are not to study a living language as a dead one, one has to track the word as it pirouettes through the world.

Dilip M. Menon works on the intellectual and social history of South Asia, particularly on questions of caste and inequality. Over the past decade, his work has broadened to think with the question of generating theory from the Global South and engaging with oceanic histories. He is currently a Professor of History and International Relations at the University of Witwatersrand and has a forthcoming edited volume titled *Cinemas of the Global South: Towards a Southern Aesthetics* (2024).

Mahmoud Al-Zayed is a literary scholar of comparative literature working across different theoretical and literary traditions of South Asia, Africa, and the Islamicate World. Engaging with postcolonial and decolonial traditions of thought and practice, he writes on aesthetics, decolonisation, philosophies of liberation, intellectual history, and social theory from contemporary

44 M. M. Bakhtin, "Interview One February 22, 1973," in *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Duvakin Interviews, 1973*, ed. Slav N. Gratchev and Margarita Marinova, trans. Margarita Marinova (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2019), 41–42.



Dilip M. Menon speaking at The Forge Bookshop, Johannesburg on the occasion of the book launch of *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South* on October 18, 2022

PHOTOGRAPH BY MWELELA CELE

Arab and Muslim thought. He is a postdoctoral research associate and an Einstein Researcher at the Institute of Islamic Studies, Freie Universität Berlin.

Acknowledgements

This conversation was conducted as part of the academic activities of the research project “Beyond Social Cohesion: Global Repertoires of Living Together” (RePLITO), funded in the framework of the Grand Challenge Initiative Social Cohesion by the Berlin University Alliance (2021–2024). Many thanks to Islam Dayeh and Colinda Lindermann for their careful reading.

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