Epistemo-patrimony: speaking and owning in the Indian diaspora

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Noting the relative absence of claims for the restitution of cultural heritage objects by diasporic Indians in North America and Europe, this paper explores the heated contestation over what might be called ‘epistemo-patrimony’. This term describes the knowledge forms and enunciatory protocols through which India and Hinduism can be constituted as proper objects. Recent interventions by the Infinity Foundation are examined through analogy with the debate between John Searle and Jacques Derrida, and it is suggested that epistemo-patrimony is the ground on which the nature and threat of iteration are fought. The general lesson that emerges from this – namely that all discourses and practices around the nation endlessly confront the impossibility of repetition without difference – is christened iter(n)ation.

The performative intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation’s self-generation by casting a shadow ...

Bhabha 1990: 299, emphasis in original

In November 2003 an egg went speeding through the ether of the Brunei Theatre in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). I’ll come back to it very shortly. To understand it, however, we first need to understand the Cartel, at a member of which the egg was thrown. The Cartel are a group committed to the global dominance of the ‘Western Knowledge Factory’. They need to be understood in terms of epochal transformations in the geopolitical order in which the burden of colonialism has shifted its axis across the Atlantic. The collapse of the British Empire led to the emergence of the USA as the biggest ‘funding source for India-related studies worldwide’ and in the process created a new, essentially colonial, structure of power-knowledge. ‘Multi-billion dollar private foundations’ such as the Pew Trust and the Ford Foundation have orchestrated a knowledge of India focused on ‘certain themes and theories’ which have consolidated the hermetic protocols of the Cartel. The scholars who service this Cartel are to be understood not as intellectuals able to pursue the integrity of ideas but in militarized terms (with a Heideggerean undercurrent) as part of a ‘standing army of scholars [and] activists ready for deployment’. South Asian scholars who constitute a significant element in this formation are ‘not truly free’ but will instead mobilize as a ‘Sepoy Army to defend the fortress’ (Malhotra 2006a).
The Infinity Foundation

This cosmology – with the Cartel located at its centre – is the vision of Rajiv Malhotra, an Indian American, Princeton-resident entrepreneur, and creator in 1995 of the Infinity Foundation, which ‘seeks to promote East-West dialogue and a proper understanding of the Indian civilisational experience in the world’. Malhotra, who might also be seen as an ethno-preneur (to use Dipanker Gupta’s [2004] felicitous phrase) has been in the forefront of debates about ‘who speaks for Hinduism?’ (Malhotra n.d.). The Infinity Foundation describes itself as a non-profit organization which makes grants in the ‘areas of compassion and wisdom’. Ostensibly eschewing any form of cultural fundamentalism, it proposes that ‘indigenous non-Western civilizations get a seat on the table as equals in crafting the frameworks of discourse’. Resonant in certain respects with critiques by Edward Said (1978), Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992; 2000), and what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2009) describes as a form of epistemicide, the Infinity Foundation co-optaspects of radical postcolonial discourse for a conservative project of enunciative authority in which the present is permeated by traces of a historically deep asymmetry.

Symptomatic of this is the importance placed on various mythic scenes of exchange featuring Warren Hastings and Sir William Jones. Governor-General Hastings hired eleven pandits in 1772 to (in the words of Rajiv Malhotra) ‘cooperate with the East India Company in the creation of a new digest of laws that would enable British courts to govern under the pretext of implementing “Hindu law”’. Published as A code of Gentoo laws by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed in 1776, this event embodies both a historical act of colonial expropriation and a slur which continues to resonate in a contemporary North American context, ‘Gentoo’ being, as Malhotra maintains, ‘a derogatory term similar to “nigger”’ (Malhotra n.d.).

Analogous work is performed by the sculptured relief on a memorial to the Orientalist William Jones at University College, Oxford. Surrounded by the inscription ‘Justinian of India ... He formed a digest of Hindu and Mohammaden laws’, Jones is shown seated at a writing desk on the left. Under his watchful gaze sit three Indian scholars in a position of seeming subservience. For the Infinity Foundation this ‘telling sculpture’ inverts Jones’s experience of sitting at the feet of learned pandits and acquiring a ‘tiny tip of the iceberg of Indian dharamashastra literature’. It reveals ‘how the semiotics of colonial encounters [have] attempted to inscribe a profound asymmetry of epistemic prestige upon the future East-West exchange of knowledge’.

This leitmotif of epistemic theft echoes the North Indian Banarasi complaint, described by the anthropologist Jonathan Parry, that the nineteenth-century German Orientalist Max Müller’s theft of chunks of the Sama-veda facilitated German scientists’ later development of the atom bomb (1985: 206). For Parry’s informants this is one example of the ‘fabulous power’ to which the ancient scriptures give access, and is symptomatic of the collapsing of temporal horizons in which future problems can be resolved by an appeal to the wisdom of a past kept alive by the ‘technology of the intellect’. This is an issue to which we will return.

Enunciative authority

At stake in these debates – which usually pit diasporic Hindus (outside the academy) against non-Hindu North American scholars of religion, historians, and anthropologists – is the question of enunciative authority and responsibility. In the contest over ‘speaking’, the domain of the explicitly artefactual is displaced by an anxious space of
iteration in which an authorized speech emerges as the only hope for the recuperation of discourse threatened by a perpetual slippage and loss.

We touch here on a paradox which is central to my interest in this topic: it is knowledge, rather than objects, which is the focus of disputes about Indian patrimony in North American and European contexts. Certain dislocated objects retain a symbolic yield, but they are a distinctly minor mode in the expression of national and cultural self-presence (but see Davis 1997; Guha-Thakurta 2004; Mathur 2007). Consider, for instance, the Koh-i-noor, the 105-carat diamond from Golconda. Carried along by a successive tide of conquests – owned by the Kakatiya kings, then Babur, installed by Shah Jahan in the peacock throne, and briefly possessed by the Sikh Maharaja Ranjit Singh before its expropriation by the British as part of the Treaty of Lahore in 1849 and subsequent introduction into Queen Victoria’s Crown Jewels – the Koh-i-noor became the most celebrated material totem of British colonialism’s control of Indian resources.

It is thus hardly surprising that claims for repatriation continue to be made, but it is worth underlining how infrequent these are and what little cultural purchase they have. Kuldip Nayar, Indian High Commissioner to the UK, requested repatriation in 1990 and pursued this claim upon his return to India. Obtaining fifty signatures (including that of the current Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh) demanding the return of the diamond, the then Foreign Minister, Jaswant Singh, assured him that the Indian government would ‘take up the matter with London forthwith’. The BBC reported that ‘Indian MPs demand Kohinoor’s return’ and drew a parallel with the Elgin Marbles (Jacob 2000). To Nayar’s disappointment, however, he soon discovered that no action was taken, that reminders to the Foreign Minister provoked only ‘a gentle smile’, and that the Indian government was ‘procrastinating’ (Nayar 2005). The Elgin Marbles analogy seemed misplaced.

This relative indifference – by various Indian governments, and most of its citizens – towards the ownership and interpretation of objects can be contrasted with the much greater investment by various, very different, parties in claims to knowledge. Some of these contest have taken place within India: in recent years high-profile disputes have erupted around the left-wing artists’ group SAHMAT’s interpretation of the Ramayan (Puniyani 2008), ongoing campaigns against the eminent artist M.F. Husain’s representations of Hindu deities (Ramaswamy 2010), and the US historian James W. Laine’s account of the seventeenth-century Maratha warrior Shivaji. Laine, Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Macalester College (Minnesota), argued in Shivaji: Hindu king in Islamic India (2003) that the religious frontier was far more permeable than later essentialist and politicized accounts allow, that Shivaji himself was a skilled mediator between fluid positions, and further that his parents may have been estranged. In many ways his text is a case study of the iterability and ambivalence of any historical object. This revisionism (which is so routine in the global Academy) prompted demonstrations, the banning of the book throughout India, a warning by then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee ‘not to play with our national pride’, the trashing of part of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune (because he had thanked some BORI scholars in his acknowledgments), and an approach by the Maharashtrian government to Interpol requesting his arrest (BBC News 2004).

The above disputes all unfolded as part of a global conversation which fused the concerns of local Indian organizations with web-based – frequently US-resident – pressure groups and activists. This directs our attention to the often-determining role of deterritorialized forces in insisting upon the nature of locality and tradition from a
distance and the new geographies facilitated by ‘electronic propinquity’ (Appadurai 1996: 38, 29). Thus the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute was attacked in January 2004 by a formerly obscure local group, the Sambhaji Brigade, and an anonymous commentator writing on the US Amazon site (which was retailing his book) in February of that year positioned Laine’s account within a global epistemic-scape, complaining that Laine refused to

visit the lands of his forefathers to take a scimitar to the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon, Gaul or Nordic tales of bravery that continue through even more spectacular efforts in say, Hollywood. Or even Star Wars. Better to delete an irritating piece of Maharashtrian history. Papa [Laine] will first attack native historians on trumped up charges, to show how their caste affinities prevent them from being objective, unlike the colonial and neo-colonial myth-makers who are descended into Indology pure and milk-white.

‘Derrida inside’: knowledge protocols
The above critic of Laine directs our attention to an enduring asymmetry: the confidence that ‘milk-white’ Indologists feel in attacking ‘native’ epistemology. This is one of the key concerns of commentators associated with the Infinity Foundation (Malhotra and a penumbra of other writers who contribute to their website) who have analysed in considerable detail the knowledge protocols that authorize some, and in their view disenfranchise other, voices. This helps explain the Infinity Foundation’s otherwise curious focus on issues such as peer review: for Malhotra and others this emerges as a central mechanism in the establishment of faulty and demeaning paradigms of study. Let us consider the critique in more detail before returning to the broader question of enunciation and iteration.

‘Peer review’, in the Infinity Foundation’s view, polices the break between ‘academicians’ and ‘ordinary folks’ (Malhotra 2006b), and is the fundamental building block of the ‘knowledge production cartel’. Peer review is mobilized as an alibi and badge of immunity from critiques outside academia which – because of their positioning outside the Cartel – are then recoded as ‘attacks’. Peer review facilitates a collective delusion that the Emperor does indeed have clothes, and is the mechanism through which the requisite presence of ‘theory’ is determined. Liberal arts students are fearful of being seen as ‘under-theorized’, Malhotra argues, and this leads them to hyperbolic claims underpinned by strategic citationality. In a memorable, and witty, discussion, Malhotra suggests that ‘name dropping ... names, predigrees and institutional affiliations’ (which he observes are often ‘substitutes for substance’) are an appeal to a secret power: ‘It’s like saying, “Pentium inside” to prove one’s legitimacy. Many desi [i.e. overseas Indian] scholars are hoping to make their career by being able to say “Derrida inside”’ (italics in original).

Everything is negotiable
A further aspect of the Infinity Foundation’s critique concerns the Western Knowledge Factory’s ability to incorporate and annul all opposition. Genuinely conflictual positions are excluded through peer review, but the Cartel as a system of knowledge celebrates ‘managed and controlled forms of opposition’ which are ‘virtual’, not ‘real’. Thus Indian postcolonialists (even the ones who started out with good intentions) are inevitably corrupted into ‘outsourced coolies who sustain and enhance the politics of the Western Knowledge Factory’.
I have suggested that the Infinity Foundation cloaks itself in a carapace of radical complaint: it makes many good observations about continuing neo-colonial relations with the global academy. Many of its most powerful critiques of the asymmetry of epistemologies (e.g., Malhotra’s [2006b] observation that ‘Indian culture is positioned the wrong end of the lens, namely, as the “object” of enquiry, and not as being capable of providing any of the theories to be used in the study’ [italics in original]) might be seen as a vernacular restatement of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) important observations about the hegemony of a putatively universal European history.4

However, alongside these compelling claims is a very different – essentially class-based – complaint about the nature of the India (often referred to as ‘India Inc.’ by Malhotra) that the Cartel represents. It is here that Malhotra (n.d.) falls back on his corporate experience, advocating ‘dis-intermediation’ and the like. He uses the logic of what he calls ‘Marketing 101’, pointing out that the first job is to identify ‘the target market to whom Hinduism education is relevant’. The Cartel focuses on ‘poor Hindus, abused women, and various social injustices depicted as chronic evils of Indic civilization’. But Marketing 101 would immediately reveal that ‘the typical Microsoft executive going to India on business is unlikely to be negotiating a deal with a tribal woman’. The Cartel’s teachings, he concludes, are fit only for missionaries. The Infinity Foundation here allies itself with an Indian middle class and NRI (Non-Resident Indian) investment in what – during the 2004 elections campaign – became known as ‘India Shining’, a glossy corporate de-subalternized phantasm of India as a prosperous dreamworld which ultimately failed to persuade India’s electors. ‘India Shining’ or ‘Bharat Uday’ was a (BJP) government advertising campaign quickly co-opted as part of an election strategy which backfired dramatically when countered by a Congress campaign that invoked a different temporality through a black-and-white aesthetics of poverty (Pinney 2005).

Malhotra’s championing of an ‘India Inc.’ suggests a perverse echo with a text which will be drawn upon extensively in the second half of this paper: Jacques Derrida’s Limited Inc. (1988). In that text, a rejoinder to John Searle’s (1977) critique of Derrida’s (1977) account of Austinian speech act theory, Derrida had christened Searle Sarl (as in Société à responsabilité limitée) to reflect the ‘corporate’ de-inviduated nature of Searle’s writing (reliant as it was on acknowledged input from other colleagues, friends, etc.). Sarl signified the ‘difficulty in naming the definite origin’ of his interlocutor (Derrida 1988: 36): ‘India Inc.’ might be seen as Malhotra’s own, unwitting, acknowledgement of a similar difficulty when it comes to the naming and identity of nations.

But Malhotra’s ethno-preneurialism also makes a fascinating, paradoxical, and important claim: that the enunciatory contestation of authority is in itself desirable. As he writes: ‘America’s democracy thrives on protest and speaking out [and asks] ... who speaks out for Hinduism? ... Amongst all the major world’s religions [that] academics study, Hinduism has the lowest ratio of scholars from within the tradition to scholars who stand outside of it’ (Malhotra n.d.). He told the Washington Post that he formulated his strategy after visiting African American scholars at Princeton University, ‘who told him that it had taken the civil rights movement before black scholars were allowed into schools to tell their own history’, and then gives this a consumerist twist, declaring that, ‘It’s no different from Ralph Nader saying that we need a consumer voice against General Motors’. Malhotra’s curious blend of cultural essentialism and free market celebration is captured in his memorable observation, in his Washington Post interview, that ‘In America everything is negotiable ... you have to negotiate who you are and how they think of you’ (Malhotra n.d.).
The aesthetics of displacement

Indian claims to enunciative authority in North America and Europe have so far only extended to threats to kill professors and the hurling of a single egg. But the segmentary logic of other exclusivist claims in India, and about India, have had more serious consequences. The ratcheting-up of regionalist Shiv Sena discourse (and by the associated Raj Thackeray’s Navnirman Sena) about a Mumbai exclusively for Maharashtrians (involving, for instance, proposed Marathi language tests for taxi drivers) has led to an increasing number of attacks on North Indians in Mumbai, which have inevitably been obscured by the more recent carnage in that city.

In late October 2008 the killing of a 25-year-old labourer, Dharamdev Ramnarain Rai, from Uttar Pradesh was widely reported in the Indian press as an instance of the new backlash, although police who charged six men with the murder explicitly denied this, claiming that a row had erupted over who was entitled to sit in a window seat (Singh 2008).

One month earlier, Jaya Bachchan, the wife of India’s most famous actor (Amitabh Bachchan), was forced to issue an apology about her decision to speak in Hindi at the music launch of a Hindi film, explaining that she was from Uttar Pradesh. ‘We are from Uttar Pradesh and will speak in Hindi. Maharashtrians please forgive us (Hum UP ke log hai, isliye Hindi mein baat karenge. Maharashtra ke log maaf kariye); the actress had said (Indo-Asian News Service 2008a).

Her decision was immediately condemned by both the Shiv Sena and the Raj Thackeray-led MNS, who declared it an ‘insult’ to Maharashtrian people and who called for a boycott of Bachchan’s work. Supporters of Raj Thackeray scoured Mumbai ‘to blacken or tear the posters’ of Amitabh Bachchan’s latest film, The last Lear, which was due for release on 12 September 2008 (Indo-Asian News Service 2008b).

In her apology in an interview to Mumbai Mirror, Jaya, said:

My remark about choosing to speak in Hindi at the music launch of a Hindi film was said innocently. Why would I go out of my way to malign the city that has given us everything? Don’t we belong to this city too? I will not show disrespect to this city till the day of my death ... I am very sorry if I have hurt the sentiments of Marathi speaking people in Mumbai and Maharashtra (Rediff India Abroad 2008).

These, perhaps puzzling, contests over enunciative authority, and what we might recognize as enunciatory aesthetics, can serve to introduce us to a currently unfolding controversy in a more conventionally literary domain which will return us to the key issue of iterability.

Arvind Adiga’s The white tiger, winner of the 2008 Man Booker Prize, interests me greatly because of the absence within it of the quality formally known as ‘literariness’. Together with Vikas Swarup’s remarkable Q & A (on which the Oscar-winning film Slumdog Millionaire was based), it allows us to think about the emergence of a new mode of writing in English in India which we might describe as ‘Bollywood demotic’.

Its relevance to the theme of this paper lies in the criticism – voiced most forcefully (but not exclusively) by the ex-Oxford, now UCLA, historian Sanjay Subrahmanym (2008) – that Adiga is not entitled to the voice through which he articulates his story of a Bihari villager-turned-Delhi-chauffeur-turned-murderer-turned-Bangalore-entrepreneur and epistolary interlocutor with Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier.

Subrahmanym clearly dislikes this wonderful book a great deal, and since it has no plot of interest (the novel, he complains, ‘just rolls on like an Indian Railways train,
from one stop to another’), all judgment of it must rest, as he puts it on ‘the novel’s narrative voice’. ‘The merit of the book’, he continues ‘must eventually rest on the credibility and verisimilitude of the voice of Balram Halwai’, the narrator.

‘Austin, Searle, & Derrida inside’

Enunciation, in what J.L. Austin (1975) called the parasitic language of fiction, no less than life, it seems, demands the authority of locality and a precise aesthetics of the vernacular. For many readers – myself included – Adiga (an Oxford-educated Tamil Brahmin) wonderfully and comically invokes what Ashis Nandy once called the ‘cultural underground’ of the ‘bow-tie wearing waiter in the cheap backstreet restaurant’ (1992: 45). But for Subrahmanyam, Balram is simply the Anton Diffring5 of Indian English literature: one of those ‘SS officers in World War Two films speaking English among themselves in a strong Mitteleuropean accent’ (Subrahmanyam 2008).

Adiga’s crimes include the following: making Balram write about ‘kissing some god’s arse’, ‘an idiomatic expression that doesn’t exist in any North Indian language’, and failing to have the ethnographic ambitions of Zola ‘attempting to capture, notebook in hand, the vocal nuances of the Other’. In short, Adiga presents a ‘jangling dissonance of ... language, and ... falsity of expressions’: the book ‘adds another brick to the patronizing edifice it wants to tear down’.

At this point the reader begins to suspect that Subrahmanyam is playing a Derridean joke in which he consciously parodies the philosopher John Searle’s (1977) claims of a rupture of commonsense. I quote at length from Subrahmanyam, who concludes incredulously:

Neither you nor I speak English, Balram writes to Wen Jiabao at the outset of the novel, and yet the novel is written in English. We are meant to believe – even within the conventions of the realist novel – that a person who must really function in Maithili or Bhojpuri can express his thoughts seamlessly in a language that he doesn’t speak.

The philosopher John Searle, recall, had objected – through the invocation of a commonsensical language – to Derrida’s ironically humorous critique of J.L. Austin’s speech act theory. Searle protested that Derrida had wilfully chosen to misread what Austin had clearly intended to say (and which in Searle’s view he had succeeded in saying). For Searle, Austin’s intentionality (what he really meant to say, and indeed had – in his view – said) was easily recoverable. Derrida’s attempt to subvert and displace Austin’s meanings through attending to Austin’s use of metaphor and ‘casual locutions’ (Norris 1987: 177) was from Searle’s viewpoint (as commonsense upholder of the Austinian tradition) a deliberate attempt at distortion through the privileging of the margins. Searle, indeed, attempts to disenfranchise Derrida’s critique as proper philosophy, suggesting that the confrontation between analytic and continental philosophy has failed to take place:

It would be a mistake, I think, to regard Derrida’s discussion of Austin as a confrontation between two prominent philosophical traditions. This is not so much because Derrida has failed to discuss the central theses in Austin’s theory of language, but rather because he has misunderstood and misstated Austin’s position at several crucial points, as I shall attempt to show, and thus the confrontation never quite takes place (Searle cited by Derrida 1988: 40, Derrida’s own italicization).

Derrida’s suggestion that ‘fictive or imaginary speech acts’ (i.e. those occurring within ‘fiction’ and which Austin had discounted as worthy of study) could be exemplary of

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performativity, and the profound problematization of the nature of any context which might frame utterance, were, for Searle, the low points of this perverse inversion of commonsense, and evoke the peculiar power of psychoanalysis (a strong theme in US religious studies commentaries on Hinduism) to unsettle the Infinity Foundation. Just as, for Searle, Derridean deconstruction, working through the contradictions on the margins of a practice, was a wilful distortion of what was self-evidently true, so for many diasporic Hindu activists, psychoanalysis, propelled by a similar commitment to the significant forces visible only on the margin, involved the imposition of an alien and inappropriate system of thought onto a tradition whose living adherents were the proper guardians.

In this sense, Searle stood in relation to Austin as the Infinity Foundation stands to Hinduism: both claimed a proprietary ownership, an epistemo-patrimony, which positioned them as defenders of truths which were under attack by those who sought to unravel them. Just as the Infinity Foundation claims to speak for a correct Hinduism, Searle presented himself as the spokesman for the only plausible reading of Austin, pointing out what Austin ‘had really meant’ and where Derrida was going astray.

‘Freud inside’

Christopher Norris, in his exceptionally helpful commentary, notes the manner in which Searle ‘assumes absolute control over the way in which ... texts should “properly” be read, a power that passes by lineal descent from Austin to Searle’ (1987: 179). Derrida himself describes Searle and his collaborators as ‘self-made, auto-authorized heirs of Austin’ (1988: 37). What Searle objects to in a fundamental way is Derrida’s introduction of the consequences of iterability: language’s necessary slippage into endlessly new contexts, and the analysis of the play – within Austin’s thought – of what Derrida described as ‘a type of “structural unconscious” ... which seems alien, if not incompatible with speech-act theory given its current axiomatics’ (1988: 73).

Derrida’s invocation of this ‘alien’ and ‘incompatible’ ‘structural unconscious’ helps cement the link I wish to draw with the Infinity Foundation’s anxieties about psychoanalysis as a mode of engaging the Indic tradition. This will also help us return, finally, to that egg, speeding through the air at SOAS, with whose trajectory I began this paper.

The egg was thrown at Professor Wendy Doniger, the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions at the University of Chicago, an eminent figure in the global study of religion and a leading light in the psychoanalytic study of Hinduism. Doniger and her followers’ chief defect in the eyes of their critics (in addition to their peer-review-guaranteed exclusivity and hermetic immunity to critique) is this insistence on the relevance of psychoanalytic approaches to the understanding of Hinduism.

This was demonstrated in the questions posed to her at SOAS following the egg-hurling incident. These included queries about the institution which had awarded her ‘psychoanalytic ... degree’ (Doniger replied that she had none); whether she had ever been psychoanalysed (she had not); and the final demand to explain why ‘you have the right to psychoanalyse Hindu texts’. These, Doniger has observed, were the same questions asked of her at the 2000 meeting of the American Academy of Religion following the presentation of a festschrift for her 60th birthday, and were asked by none other than Rajiv Malhotra of the Infinity Foundation (Braverman 2004).

Malhotra has pointed to what he describes as ‘Wendy’s Child Syndrome’ in a very widely read 24,000-word essay published on the Indian website Sulekha.com. Doniger
is, Malhotra (2002) observes, ‘undoubtedly the most powerful person in academic Hinduism Studies today’, and has built a powerful ‘franchise’ by advancing her ‘cult of students’ into ‘high leverage academic jobs’ where they reproduce her psychoanalytic disposition.

Malhotra’s title – ‘Wendy’s Child Syndrome’ – is an obvious allusion to Jeffrey Kripal’s Kali’s child: the mystic and the erotic in the life and teachings of Ramakrishna (1995). This book, together with Paul Courtright’s Ganesa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings (1985), has been at the centre of the contest between ‘auto-authorized heirs’ and those who appeal to an unconsciousness of the margins. Kripal, Doniger’s student at the University of Chicago, won acclaim with the book: this included, as Malhotra notes, the First Book Award from the American Academy of Religion in 1996, jobs at Harvard and Rice, and a position as the top choice for reading about Ramakrishna in The Encyclopedia Britannica.

Kripal’s claims – on the basis of contested readings of Bengali texts – that the great Calcuttan nineteenth-century sage Ramakrishna manipulated the genitals of his young devotees during ecstatic trances understandably scandalized followers of the Ramakrishna Order, many Indian reviewers, and other readers. There were two serious attempts to have the book banned in India, and a campaign of letter-writing that attempted to deny Kripal’s tenure case at Rice in 2002. Specific complaints have focused on Kripal’s Bengali competence (the second 1998 edition of the text corrected many errors) and the appropriateness of a non-Hindu’s insistence on the homoerotic dimension of Hindu mystical practice. One outraged commentator on the US Amazon site suggested that

using (misusing) [F]reudian principles, one can say the following thing about [C]hristianity[:]Jesus was a filthy, unclean man dressed in rags. He learned some magic tricks from the visiting Persian merchants. The Romans often invited him to perform at their parties, and in exchange, they offered him wine. So he routinely got drunk, tried to be ‘a notorious womanizer’, and was a hobo all his life ...

Paul Courtright’s 1985 argument (with a foreword by Doniger) about the Oedipal dimension of the narrative concerning the god Ganesh was belatedly targeted by Infinity Foundation and Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America Inc. members in the wake of the controversy over Kripal’s book. ‘The Professor bastard should be hanged’, said one of numerous emails (Vedantam 2004); the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, Hindu Student Council collected 7,000 signatures for a petition demanding an apology; and in February 2004 the Concerned Community of Atlanta (a local Hindu organization) met with the Dean at Emory (where Courtright teaches) and demanded that Emory classify his interpretations as ‘acts of racial insensitivity’. An on-line Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) commentator noted that ‘an Anthropology professor at Emory had used a phrase containing [the] N-word in an informal discussion’ and Emory had been forced to apologize. By contrast ‘the University proudly displays the offending book in its department, amounting to direct endorsement’ (Tiwari 2004).

Certain members of the Cartel claim that the reason for the critique is that they are non-Hindu Americans, and that their enemies hold that only believers should be allowed to speak and write about Hinduism. Doniger has claimed that a ‘fanatical nationalism’ is demanding that ‘no one who is not a Hindu has the right to speak about
Hinduism at all’ (Vedantam 2004). If she is correct, the vast number of texts about Hinduism published by non-Hindus which continue to appear every year stand as testimony to the inefficacy of that nationalism.7 As one example of this enunciative exclusivity, Doniger cites the deletion of her original online Encarta essay on Hinduism and its substitution (following a campaign by a Microsoft engineer and Infinity Foundation advisory board member, Sankrant Sanu, in 2002 for an ‘emic’ interpretation) by a piece authored by Arvind Sharma, a McGill professor of comparative religion. As Doniger told the Washington Post, ‘It does not matter whether the article published under my name was right or wrong. The only important thing about it was that I wrote it and someone named Sharma did not’ (Vedantam 2004).

The Cartel’s opponents have a point: traditionally it has been the case that scholars of Christianity and Judaism have been born into the religion they studied. For leading scholars of Hinduism such as Doniger, Kripal, and Courtright, as John Stratton Hawley points out, this was not the case: ‘[They came] to Hinduism only later in life’ (Braverman 2004). Courtright, reflecting on the events in an interview with Amy Braverman, concluded that the conflict arose from the assumption made by him and other scholars that the ‘story’ belonged ‘to the public domain, not just Hindus’ (Braverman 2004). This raises the spectre of proprietary claims to knowledge (inherently destructive of the informational flows of the public sphere) of the kind critiqued by Michael F. Brown (1998). Equally, many of the contests alluded to above might be seen as versions of the imbroglio in which the anthropologist David Mosse (2006: 942) found himself engulfed following his ethnographic study of a DFID-funded project in India. The objects of Mosse’s study failed to recognize themselves in Mosse’s interpretation and took vigorous action to attempt to ‘rectify’ this.

However, such a parallel – which would focus on the question of misrepresentation within a common epistemological field – diverts attention from the more fundamental question of the modality of representation which surely drives the conflicts I have been describing. The debate between Searle and Derrida and Searle’s attempt to disenfranchise Derrida’s critique tout court as a kind of mis-speciation of philosophy helps us to understand the way in which psychoanalysis needs to be rejected so vehemently by the Cartel’s opponents. It is true that in ‘Wendy’s Child Syndrome’ Malhotra falls into the trap of proposing psychoanalytic hypotheses for what he sees as his opponents’ personal pathologies, but in general Freud is clearly marked out as alien in a double sense: alien to the Indic tradition and alien to the possibility of ‘auto-authorization’.

Conclusion: iter(n)ation

‘Freud inside’ thus not only embodies a slavish capitulation to the Cartel, a desire to be fashionably theorized, but also signals a pure and dangerous form of iterability, of slippage on the margins, threatening a movement of interpretation beyond the bounds of recuperation.

Shortly I will consider whether we should understand this as a condition of all performance around nationalism, and to what extent there is a specifically South Asian narrative unfolding here. However, before we return to that question let us note how the alien nature of iterability has an interesting South Asian echo for, as Gayatri Spivak (1980: 39) notes, in North Indian languages itar connotes ‘other, different, and low’, carrying, as she suggests, ‘an ethico-political charge’. Stuart MacGregor’s standard Hindi dictionary glosses itar as ‘other, remaining ... inferior’ (1993: 104). In Bengali, as Nayanika Mookherjee points out (pers. comm.), the word connotes ‘base, mean, vile'.

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This perhaps helps us make sense of Malhotra’s anxieties about the decay of ‘India Inc.’ into the subaltern project of ‘poor Hindus’ and ‘abused women’.

Nationalism confronts us with a problem of authority, performance, and iteration. It is caught in a paradox: it presupposes an identity, a ‘feeling’ which is self-present and ‘auto-authorized’ but which nevertheless depends on an inscription – a performance, a continual reiteration. But this iteration, this insistence, also creates, inevitably, the space in which that authority slips away. This is what Spivak refers to as the ‘graphic of iterability rather than the logic of repetition’ (1980: 36). The problem Malhotra and, indeed, all nationalists (and all identitarians) confront is the unwelcome fact that ‘[i]t is in terms of iterable (rather than repeatable) identities that communication and consensus are established’ (Spivak 1980: 37) not through the impossible, unactualizable, self-identity of the nation. The nation as source, tradition, purity, is ineluctably subject to dissemination.

For Derrida and Homi Bhabha (whose discussion of the performativity of ‘national representation’ is specifically relevant to the current discussion), performativity signals the slippage and supplementarity of iteration in general. Much of Derrida’s work circles around the observation that ‘language is subject to a generalized “iterability” – or readiness to be grafted into new and unforeseeable contexts – such that no appeal to performative intent can serve to delimit the range of possible meaning’ (Norris 1987: 178). In a parallel manner, Bhabha proposes the term ‘dissemiNation’ (in part homage to the ‘wit and wisdom’ of Derrida [Bhabha 1990: 291]) as means of signalling the ‘disjunctive representation of the social [in the] double-time of the nation’ (1990: 294). Rejecting that totality and singularity predicated on homogeneity and anonymity invoked by many historians of the origins of nations (the impossible self-presence of the nation), Bhabha stresses instead a tension between the pedagogical and performative made visible in the ‘splitting’ of the national subject (1990: 297, 298). This is the ‘shadow’ of the performative, highlighted in the epigraph with which I began this essay.

I have tried to clarify our understanding of current epistemo-patrimonial claims through reference to the ‘debate’ between Searle and Derrida. Searle aspired to be, in Derrida’s words, the ‘self-made, auto-authorized [heir] of Austin’ and Rajiv Malhotra presents himself as a necessarily Hindu exponent of a proper Hinduism; both aspire to a circular self-presence of knowledge. In both cases patrimonial accounts of knowledge find themselves confronted with an aesthetics of fluidity and immateriality: a supplementarity, an aesthetics that no longer offers the possibility of finitude. This is the equivalent of that impossible Sonar Bangla or Golden Bengal to which Nayanika Mookherjee alludes in this volume, and suggests a perverse reading of the imperative never again as recognition of repetition’s necessary incarnation as difference. The putatively self-present nation in practice can only be imagined nostalgically or proleptically; it is never realizable on its own terms in the present. It is always, necessarily, an iter(n)ation.

However, there is more to this. The denial of iterability, for both Searle and Malhotra, let us be clear, is intrinsically artefactual and aesthetic: it describes (or hopes to describe) an object with surfaces and limits. We might imagine this artefact of self-present identity as the ‘technology of the intellect’ that Jonathan Parry (1985) so astutely describes in which the knowledge of the guru is replicated perfectly by the chela (in, we might note, with the benefit of Derrida [1976], Socratic-Platonic fashion). Or, we might imagine it in terms of popular mass-produced images of Hanuman materialized from the Devanagri form of his master Ram (Figs 1 and 2) endlessly repeated (but not, we might add, iterated).
This perfect, divine, mimesis is a central part of the tradition that the Infinity Foundation is dedicated to upholding. Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, for instance, which in its medieval Hindi version by Tulsidas remains, probably, the most widely read text in India (Lutgendorf 1991), is itself the perfect, formal, repetition of a divine structure and narrative, originating in a slain Krauncha bird, echoed in Valmiki, and materialized in the *Ramayana*. The text itself is saturated with the celebration of this pure mimesis (‘place the name of Rama as a jeweled lamp at the door of your lips’ [Growse 1922: 17]) and is a prime piece of evidence of what Parry theorizes as the ‘technology of the intellect’.

This is the subjunctive, proleptic, aesthetic space of repetitive self-identity: pure, uncorrupted, more than one, as Bhabha is fond of saying, but less than double. That is the hope. However, ‘[t]he condition or effect of interminable iterations’ is, as Gayatri Spivak, notes that ‘material objects’ and similar phenomena present themselves ‘not as

*Figure 1.* Lithograph issued by a Ratlam publisher depicting Hanuman, whose body is composed of the endlessly repeated name of his master, the god Ram, c.1980. (Private collection.)
self-identical but as a space of dispersion’ (1980: 40). Every identity, every nation of necessity struggles with its internal others – its low and inferior citizens – those who fail to repeat the purity of the original.

We are left with the seeming paradox of why Infinity-type acrimony rarely extends to conventional objects. North American museums are as filled, as are their British counterparts, with material embodiments of the Indic tradition with dubious provenance. However, these rarely figure in tournaments of contestatory value. My suggestion is that this work of contestation is performed – and exhausted – in conflicts over enunciatory authority and in the aesthetic project of auto-authorization. Where knowledge is substance (as it is unquestionably in the Indic tradition, as in others), enunciation becomes an act of artefact production. It is this contested object, this epistemo-patrimony, this iter(n)ation which has decisively displaced the Koh-i-noor and other archaic embodiments of identity in the twenty-first-century Indian diaspora.

NOTES

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4 ‘“Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian”, “Chinese” and “Kenyan” and so on’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 27).
5 Diffring, 1918-89, was a character actor who played Nazis in classic war movies such as Heroes of Telemark (1965) and Where eagles dare (1968).
7 Just as Derrida notes (perhaps surprisingly) that he considered himself ‘in many respects quite close to Austin, both interested in and indebted to his problematic’ (1988: 38), I find myself strangely close to Malhotra’s problematic and surprisingly unable to fully identify with the energy of Doniger’s denunciation of his position and actions.

Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1 showing Hanuman’s foot composed of Devanagri repetitions of ‘Ram’. (Private collection.)
REFERENCES


Patrimoine épistémologique : parler et posséder dans la diaspora indienne

Résumé

Face à l’absence relative de demandes de restitution des objets du patrimoine culturel par les Indiens de la diaspora d’Amérique du Nord et d’Europe, l’auteur analyse la vive contestation de ce que l’on pourrait appeler le « patrimoine épistémologique ». Ce terme désigne les formes de savoir et les protocoles d’énonciation qui confèrent à l’Inde et à l’hindouisme le statut d’objets. Les récentes interventions de l’Infinity Foundation sont examinées par analogie avec le débat entre John Searle et Jacques Derrida, et l’auteur suggère que le patrimoine épistémologique est le terrain sur lequel se jouent la nature et la menace de l’itération. L’enseignement général à en tirer, à savoir le fait que tous les discours et les pratiques concernant la nation se heurtent sans fin à l’impossibilité d’une répétition sans différence, est baptisé iteration.

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