Prof. Shiv Visvanathan's talk at the University on 6 August 2105

Prof. Shiv Visvanathan's talk on "Traditions of Technology and Imagination" raised several fundamental concerns regarding the discrepancy between lived experiences, ways of reflecting and relating to one's cultural environment and of locating it within the available discourse on tradition and cultural imagination. The latter is formed by conceptual categories of the West that have little to do with the Indian cultural context. Indeed, much is lost in this process of cultural translation. Visvanathan used the term 'obsolescence' to describe the dilemma of marginalization and subsequent omission of distinct and peculiar kinds of engaging with one's reality in the light of universal discourses.

Just like several different varieties of the colour red and, each with its own particular names that discern and address a specific shade of red, when imported into the English language lose its distinction and become a generic "red", much of our own context is inarticulable in an alien conceptual framework. Visvanathan proposed a theory of waste and the place of waste in cultural memory. Waste or junk is considered as dirty, menial and something that needs to be thrown away. For him, waste contains sedimented memories and traces of what was and, perhaps, what no longer is. Waste, therefore, is at once a retention system and a response. It is an alternate world. He quoted C.V Sheshadri who said, "waste is the only resource of a wasted people". He spoke of Nek Chand, the sculptor who recreated and brought to life from waste the memory of an entire "dead" village. He spoke of re-imagining Gandhi with the concept of "waste".

Technology and innovation in the West resort to a museumization of experience. But India is a living tradition. The imposition and violence of Western science and technology in India can be seen in the displacement and erasure of Indian cultural technologies and entire communities that cannot be separated from these technologies. Green revolution and genetically modified seeds, textile technology…the examples are diverse and manifold. How does one account for such violence? By this, one is not to promot a nativist stereotype. The question rather is how do we mediate between these worlds that think differently? Drawing on several episodes in the illuminating history of science, Shiv Visvanathan called for cognitive justice, the right for different knowledges to coexist.