

Introductory Remarks:

Shri Gurubhyo Namah! Respected Professors Ananth, Nag, and Suresh, it has been a pleasure to write this talk. I am grateful for your kind invitation and thought-provoking questions. Am also thankful to my friends; LS Ganesh, Srikanth Rajan, and Sriram Nambiar, for their constructive criticism.

As IIT Madras readies itself to celebrate sixty years of existence, this venerable institution, conceived in a fit of futurism, finds itself asking questions, perhaps, for the first time, about history and historiography, memory and memorabilia, amnesia and nostalgia.¹ You might wonder if this incipient itch for history is just an artifact of ageing; of the institution and individuals? Or could this become a more meaningful and serious scholarly query? Might this quest for an intellectual heritage of this august institution lead to new directions in technology? If, indeed, the history of IIT were to be an object of research, how could we contextualize it? With your permission, I humbly share some thoughts and several questions for your consideration.

My talk is structured in seven notes, seven frequencies, as it were, through which the history of IIT maybe perceived and celebrated. The first note begins

¹ "We want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong *Futurists!*" FT Marinetti

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

with memory, the melody of historiography. The second is about narratives of craft and the craft of the narrative. However, history is rooted in geography, and thus the third note is a local history. The primary cadence of any history is marked by change and continuity, and that forms the basis of the fourth *svaram*. The fifth is, in a sense, a temporal telescope, wherein I view the visage of IIT Madras across a 1,500 year old narrative landscape. The sixth section is stratigraphic in nature, “an archaeology of gnosis,” as it were, uncovering the footprints of Shri Appayya Dikshitar, a Sage, scholar, and teacher, who lived right here, and not very long ago. The final forward-looking note calls for an imaginative intertextuality on the occasion of our diamond jubilee celebrations.

Of Marga-darshis and Marga-bandhus:

I am aware we have had a Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in one form or the other for the longest time, and that there has always been a belief that engineering undergraduates need to be ennobled by exposure to electives in the humanities, even if it be to the harsh sounds of Germanic declensions. This belief in the civilising conjugation of humanities, of course, maybe questioned, especially today, in the light of widespread availability of both learning (and conjugation) opportunities.

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

However, nearly forty years ago, during my first semester, in 1979, a large number of us were enrolled into an introductory and mandatory global history, “From Plato to Nato,” taught by Professor Ramachandran. My memory of his lectures remains amorphous, but the enduring impression of a competent lecturer holds. We, the students, in our geekish manner, called him “Unit Vector” merely because he was rather diminutive in appearance. Professor Ramachandran was a good-hearted man, and we--little brown sahibs--were, but “birds of passage” (to paraphrase Edmund Burke) and did not get to know him much beyond the lectures. In a way, this talk is a homage to him.

While Professor Ramachandran offered us a sweeping story of change at a global scale in the first semester, Professor Rajagopalan emphasized continuity in an elective on the History of Technology in the next. He had recently joined IIT Madras, and brought with him rather novel North American notions of teaching by way of IIT Kanpur. He began by admitting that he had never taught the course before, and that therefore, he too would be learning along with us. In each class, he posed several questions and suggested that we attempt an historical essay as a semester-long exercise on any topic of our choice. He also sparked an interest in the sources and methods of history. The craft aspect of historiography is important to recognize, for in our tradition, the *kavi*, the poet, is both a maker

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

and Sage. And for us engineers, making is what we do, and so how do we make history? How shall we retell our story for ourselves, and to the larger world?

On reflection, Professor Rajagopalan was a *marga-darshi*, if not a *margabandhu*. He pointed to the Library of the Adyar Theosophical Society as a potential resource. I ended up spending a dozen Saturday mornings at the Adyar Library poring over District Gazetteers, and the publications, especially the Journals of the various Royal Asiatic Societies. The British Empire was, at its best, an empire of excellence. This was evident in these publications.

The Great Banyan Tree of the Theosophical Society outranked every other Ficus on our campus. For me, it was interesting enough to inhabit, at least in my imagination, an earlier era, perhaps a time when the Banyan of the Theosophical Society was as young as those on our campus! (No doubt, you know that the Ficus has served as an icon of continuity amidst change in Indian art for ages.) By the time one pedalled up to the Library and climbed the steps to the reading room, the entire atmosphere was eerily silent, and when the librarian fetched books and manuscripts with whispered words, it was easy to enter an epoch all together different. The Theosophical Society became a portal to the past.²

² Benjamin Lee Whorf published an early version of the Whorf thesis in the Journal of the Theosophical Society.



Vocative History:

As I cycled back home, through the campus to Velachery, just outside the gate, was a blacksmith's thatched hut. I had lingered by this little shed many a time watching the smith and his assistant at work. I couldn't help but notice that the workshop looked similar to the delicate engravings of hand drawn pictures of smithies in the District Gazetteers of mid-19th Century Colonial India.³ Nothing much had changed in more than a century or two for our blacksmiths. Maybe the bellows were rubber encased now and not with hide as in the past.⁴

³ It is remarkable to see some of the language from these early reports getting recycled in bureaucratic reports of 21st Century India!

⁴ The history of how rubber (*Hevea Brasiliensis*) came to the Kerala High Ranges is an extraordinary tale of espionage, smuggling, evangelism, and empire building. Austin Coates tells this tale well.

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com



About a hundred meters further down the road, there used to be a letterpress. It had a three-foot diameter cast iron platen, an even larger manually rotated cast iron wheel, innumerable typesetting trays made of wood, and A1-sized paper scattered all over, wet and smudged with printer's ink. The press made abrupt cling-clang sounds presaging the harsh noises of modernity to come.

When the printer got tired, right next door was a soda water "factory" where a single operator pumped hissing carbon dioxide gas into narrow necked bottles. Caught within the crimped neck was a marbled glass ball that floated up as the water got sufficiently carbonated and sealed the fizz in. On particularly hot and humid days, business was brisk. The soda water guy would push down the colorful glass-marble with his thumb, and with a flourish, pour out the bubbling soda into a thick walled glass tumbler, add some ice, salt and lemon juice, and give it a vigorous stir with an Ever-silver spoon. The printer/typesetter in his blue and white "Madras" checkered lungi and thick "*soda buddi*" glasses (necessitated

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

by all those years of assembling small inverted letter types in font size 10), would
down the lime salt soda, and return to wrestle with the press.



Locative Deities:

Yet another fifty meters down the road lived a potter, one of four in the village, with his primitive wheel and mounds of glistening moist clay inviting one to play, to knead, to throw. He would effortlessly slap a glob of clay on the center, and set the wheel in motion with a stick, and with great ease raise a beautiful pot in a matter of few whirls of the wheel. He stacked his front yard with countless pots, of various shapes and sizes, some fired, and some still drying and waiting their turn in the kiln. In the meanwhile, when he lifted his eyes as the pot rose, he would see the beautiful temple tower, the gopuram of our Dhandeeswaram temple.

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com



The legend goes that Lord Shiva rescinded the very vitality of the divinity of Death, Yama himself, when Yama literally overreached in a futile attempt to take away Markandeya, the eternal youth of yore, who was an ardent devotee of Shiva. Unable to do his deathly duties, Yama dug a tank, known ever since as the Yama *theertham*, (which stands between the potter's house and the temple gopuram,) installed a Shiva Lingam, and prayed to Lord Shiva that his health be restored so that he may execute his mortal duties, and furthermore, that he be forgiven for daring to deliver Death to Markandeya. It is said that, after many many years, not quite an eternity, Shiva pleased with Yama's devotion, let Yama resume his duties with vigour. One may note that, nevertheless, the campus continues to have an aspect of everlasting youth, if not immortality!

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com



Past the Dhandeeswaram temple, and just ahead of the Chelliamman temple, right at the corner of the Yoga Narasimha temple, where one turned, stood a little welding shop on the roadside. Being the only one in all of Velachery then, it always lit the street with either crackling ultra-bright electric sparks, or the searing steady bluish flame of the gas torch. And when one turned right at that corner, there stood an ancient tamarind tree, and under it, was a small foundry, covered by a rudimentary thatch. The foundryman would melt brass and tilt the crucible with his long tongs, pouring lovely liquid alloy into singed sand-boxes. He supplied small castings to various automobile sub-contractors.



Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

Opposite the foundry, along the long winding bund of the Velachery Lake, lived several families of weavers. Sometimes, they strung out the lengthy skeins of yarn on temporary wooden frames, and combed it with care, untangling the warp, right on the street. One could hear the rhythmic click-clack of their pit looms, and if one peeped in, one could see, once the eyes adjusted to the dim light, fine fabrics being fabricated from humble yarn. The center of weaving was Selaiyur (literally, the village of Sarees) on the Velachery-Tambaram road. Handloom fabrics would have been transported by bullock cart all the way to Fort St. George for further shipment to Great Britain, and at the Velachery Check Post, the weavers often had to bribe the guards to let their consignment through.

Dative Stories:

So, if one looks, the archaic is all around us, like a toothless old grandmother sitting in a corner of the living room and staring at the television yet lost in her own distant thoughts, clouded by time. In India, history is not confined to the library or the archives, it hugs us like humid air. In a nod to more recent technological accomplishments, our own campus had a couple of "Patton Tanks," armoured cars, and two propeller planes (with a bull's eye painted on either side of the riveted aluminium fuselages) strewn around casually; neglected monuments to the military-industrial complex that we managed not to build.

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

The printing press in Velachery was little changed from what Johannes Gutenberg built in the mid 1450s. Remember, Columbus had not yet “discovered” America when the printing press was invented. The smithy by the IIT gate and the foundry also remained unchanged for centuries, if not millennia. The pit loom would have been recognized by the inhabitants of the Indus Valley some four thousand years ago. A material history of IIT would be one way to tell our story; in which case, would we be anything more than a cargo cult?

So, is all this remembering anything more than nostalgia? How does one situate the history of IIT Madras in this landscape? If we consider history as the study of change and continuity across time, one could also reasonably view history as having a spatial aspect. Could we tell ourselves a *sthala purana* of the IIT Madras Campus, say, like Raja Rao’s **Kanthapura**?

It would indeed be interesting to overlay temporal change on a spatial view or vice versa. Take, for instance, this wonderful campus: In more ways than one, the IIT campus, all six hundred-odd wooded acres of it, is rightly seen as a post-colonial enclave in this long-lasting landscape, protected like Markandeya, if not by Shiva himself, at least by the State and its *bhoota ganas*. I use the words post-colonial advisedly, for a certain part of the campus was carved out of the hunting lodge of the Governor of the Madras Presidency, which itself, in turn,

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

came to be through the colonial appropriation of village lands. Agricultural and pastoral lands of the villages of Velachery, Taramani, Kottur, Guindy, and maybe even Thiruvanmiyur, were expropriated so that our colonial masters could hunt.

The graceful blackbucks you see on campus were introduced for the hunting pleasure of the Madras Presidency. As late as the 1970s, horsemen and women, clad in red coats and beige Jodhpurs, led by baying hounds, mounted on cantering steeds, hunted foxes across Guindy and Velachery! We still have stables on this side of Guindy by the Checkpost, and a community of Anglo-Indians on the other side, where the colonial garrisons once stood. Far far away from Britain, the imprint of the imperium fades ever-so-slowly in Chennai.

I suggest that a history of the landscape of IIT-M would be of some interest in and of itself. For example, the *Jalakanteshwarar* temple pre-dates the campus by at least a millenium, as does the little temple behind the Taramani guest house. *Peeli-Amman* was, to begin with, a divinity of the forest, a *vana devi*, who it is said, graced an ancient tree at the edge of an enchanted lake. Our campus engineer built a resplendent RCC structure to house this mother of the wild. Shortly thereafter, and most unusually, the core of the tall, majestic banyans by *Peeli-amman* withered away, followed by several lesser ones all across campus.



If we are to look at the campus as a chronotope, the lake situates itself in the watershed of the Adyar River, (and that is how the crocodile found its way to the oxidation pond)⁵. Fernand Braudel and the French Annalists showed us how to retrieve and read the *longue duree*. So what would the history of IIT be if we were to look at it as a privileged landscape, not even so much in geological time scales, but in a limited historical time scale of, say, fifteen hundred years?

Polysemic Pallava Panels:

Fifteen hundred years ago, some thirty miles south of us, Mamallapuram was a bustling port with an astonishingly inventive culture flourishing under the benevolent Pallava kings of Kanchipuram. Even now, you could go and look at the Great Penance monolith in Mamallapuram, and spend several years marvelling at it. Then, if one is sensitive enough, one might be led to wonder, what might remain of our campus 1,500 years hence? What would we have instituted?⁶

⁵ "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history." M. Bakhtin

⁶ Professor R. Rajagopalan authored a children's book on Mahabalipuram in the 1980s.

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com



This magnificent monolithic bas relief in Mamallapuram would have welcomed sailors and traders from the Roman Empire, Africa, China, and South-East Asia. Many would have seen it as a polysemic panel, for it tells multiple tales. This spectacular and singular sculpture, in turn, sparked a literary movement that has lasted into the present. In a way, this essay is a humble attempt in that tradition, and invites reading in more ways than one, and is a meditation on prising out a history of IIT from the very soil where the Sages trod.

Maandhatar, the sculptor of the Great Penance panel was himself inspired not just by the Sanskrit poets like *Bharavi* of *Kiratarjuneeyam* fame, but also the sculptors of Anuradhapura, across the Palk Strait. In turn, we know, that *Dandin* in Kanchipuram was inspired by the Great Penance panel in Mamallapuram to compose a palindromic epic poem that could be read as Ramayana in the forward direction, and as Mahabharata backwards. A synesthetic inter-textuality played out not just between conventional texts, but between Gneiss monoliths and ephemeral shlokas held in human memory. This distinctive style in the creative

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

arts and crafts is known as *Shleshha* in Sanskrit and was widespread across the country and through the ages.⁷

Many centuries after Maandhatar in Mamallapuram, Mikhail Bakhtin would term this “the dialogic imagination,” and hail heteroglossia. Truly, it must have been an extraordinarily innovative society where a *vikatakavi* was honoured for bitextuality. Dandin’s own remarkable *Kavyadarsha* is still considered by scholars as among the world’s most influential texts. Even a Sheldon Pollock reluctantly admits that Dandin’s work is a “close second to Aristotle’s *Poetics*.”

So, we have reasonable evidence to assure ourselves that Sixth Century Pallava kingdom was amongst the most fertile centers of culture in the world. Mamallapuram might have been the Manhattan of the Sixth Century. If you are still sceptical, spend a moonlit evening at Tiger’s Cave. But how, indeed, does IIT Madras connect to this long tradition of innovation and especially to the intricate intertextuality of arts and crafts in this part of the world? Can IIT, as an institution, become truly heteroglossic, and not just in the lowest literal sense of teaching technical German or conducting the JEE in both English and Hindi? What could *Shleshha* mean for an Indian Institute of Technology? In short, do Bharavi and Bakhtin belong in the Building Sciences Block?

⁷ Even now, the Kiratarjuneeyam is performed by Kathakali artists with several layers of meaning that an educated audience enjoys.

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

If such febrile yet playful creativity was evident in Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram, what was Chennai doing? What was happening at IIT Madras fifteen hundred years ago? Not much in comparison, but still....

We know Velachery was a small rain-fed agricultural village, largely self-sufficient, and perhaps even a surplus economy, for there was already the *Dhandeeswaram* temple here. The rains would have filled up the Velachery lake, and irrigation was gravity fed. So, maybe if they were lucky, they grew two crops. The Vaishnavas in the villages had begun building the Yoga Narasimha temple as well. The Chelliamman temple was also already established. How do we know this? Well, there are epigraphical inscriptions in each of these temples (hopefully they have not been destroyed in recent renovations), and these record various aspects of society and culture fifteen hundred years ago.

The very name of Velachery is of interest to us from the perspective of an ecological history.⁸ It might be the colloquial variant of the word Vilamicherry, the village of wood apples. As you might know, the campus is still home to many wood-apple trees, each one different from the others in the shape of its canopy and the taste of its fruits. Some trees even hint at the taste of truffles in their fruits! Around *Janmashtami*, you will find the tastiest wood-apples rich in Vitamin

⁸ There are other variants of the name, including Veda Shreni, and now the anglicised Velacherry!

C and antioxidants under the trees early in the morning, especially if there had been night showers and if the roving bands of macaques had not gotten to the fruits first.⁹ These spherical cricket-ball like fruits, fall and roll down the slopes when they ripen, and often find themselves carried away by monsoon rivulets to new places for germination and propagation.

Of West-Facing Deities:

What new ideas germinated in this part of the *jambudvipa*¹⁰ and sailed afar on monsoon winds?

Life would have continued more or less unchanged in the villages that make the IIT campus, for more than a thousand years, moderated by a rejuvenated Yama, largely because these were obscure and relatively poorer villages, and did not attract detrimental attention from Muslim invaders. In fact, what is relevant to our own story is that one of the greatest intellectuals and innovators of early modern India, Shri. Appayya Dikshitar (1520-1592), married into a Velachery family sometime in the Sixteenth Century. Parenthetically, it was a time of violent change worldwide, the first wave of globalization slamming down on beaches

⁹ <https://fallingfruit.org/>

¹⁰ A several hundred year old Jambu tree still stands in front of the Structural Engineering Lab.

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

worldwide.¹¹ He was born two years before Magellan circumnavigated the world, and died a 100 years after Christopher Columbus strayed into North America.

The little pond with lillies, on the other side of our ever-growing campus wall, past the Ocean Engineering department, was, for long, known as Appayya's Pond, but now mutated to *Appalam Kulam (Pappadam Pond!)*.¹² Until the Sri Lankan troubles, the Raj Bhavan allowed villagers to take pots of drinking water from here, for most of the wells had turned brackish long ago. Although a Shaiva, Appayya Dikshitar had married, Aachaalu, a Vaishnava woman from Velachery, and one day as he walked past this pond, one of the village women gathered there, pointed him out and said, "Hey, look! There goes Aachaalu's husband!"



Appayya Dikshitar, (a contemporary of William Shakespeare), arguably the greatest intellectual of early modern India, a legend in his own time, humbled by

¹¹ Greg Dening, a former Jesuit, has written some of the most sensitive histories of these encounters. See, for example, his **Islands and Beaches**.

¹² Centuries later, Shri. Ramana Maharishi, would sing the Appalam Song for his mother!

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

this casual remark, wryly observed, "*Asmin grame aachaalu barta iti prasiddah!*"¹³

And as he grew older, Appayya became enfeebled, and could not walk the five kilometers across the campus every morning from Velachery to Thiruvanmiyur to worship at the Marundeeswarar temple. It is said that he prayed with great fervor and beseeched Lord Shiva. And one morning, Shiva Marundeeswarar turned around and faced west so that Appayya could view Him from Velachery itself. To this day, He stands facing west in Thiruvanmiyur, though by all other conventions of architecture, He ought to have been facing east.

So, who then was this Appayya Dikshitar, who strode across this campus, through whose deep devotion we got our first west-facing deity? We know that he situated himself in a longer intellectual lineage that included the great Dandin and Bharavi as well. We know that he was a prolific author of no less than 104 texts, and a much sought-after teacher. He travelled far and wide, some say, even all the way to Varanasi. However, an important question for us to ponder is: could IIT Madras ever become qualified enough to lay claim to Appayya's legacy?

Let us begin to understand both his context and texts. Although this part of South India remained relatively peaceful (Fort St. George was still some 70 years into the future), it was a time when unprecedented violence was being unleashed

¹³ "Am famous in this hamlet as the husband of Aachaalu!"

(literally, the dogs of war) across the oceans by a Christian Europe, and legitimized by the *Inter Caetera* Papal Bull. How do we relate to Appayya beyond the physical proximity? We can begin by looking at the many texts from his vast *oeuvre*.

Atmaarpanastuti or Fifty (Night)Shades of Insanity?

Appaya's eclectic scholarship was deeply intertwined with his equally expansive teaching. Many of his works such as the *Kuvalayaanandam* became standard textbooks for students in Early Modern India. He not only wrote erudite expositions of Vedanta, Mimamsa, Saiva Siddhanta, Vyakarana and Kavya but also composed succinct summaries for his students. An innovator, with a refreshing approach to pedagogy, (and this may interest a teaching institute like ours), he ensured that his students were well-versed in the scholarly literature. In addition to his own meta-commentary, Appaya also taught earlier commentaries, to as many as five hundred other scholars and many more students.

He was also a poet, composing hundreds of *stotrams*, hymns, addressed to various divinities. However, it is only partially correct to view his *stotras* as just devotional hymns. Many, if not most of them, also dwelled on philosophical issues cast in elegant poetic structures, in the tradition of Shri Adi Shankara. Take for example, his poems *Brahma tarka stavam* and the *Harihara bheda stuti* which

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

are very similar in substance to his more exegetical treatise *Ratna traya pariksa*.

Not all poems were of theoretical import. Several stand out as poignant personal poems such as the one he composed during a visit to Arunachala, his natal home.

He composed yet another subset of even more intriguing *stotrams*, each accompanied and framed by its own comprehensive commentary wherein Appayya Dikshitar proceeds to cite relevant scholarly literature from the classical past. These *stotrams* function like our familiar scholarly review essays. Thus, Appayya Dikshitar made accessible a more distributed, and more ancient body of knowledge to his vast number of students, and further provided scholarly abstracts, as it were, of the state-of-the-art.



It would be fair to say that Appayya Dikshitar viewed himself as a modernist: helping a newer generation connect to the ancients **and** to the future.

It is not difficult to visualize Appayya Dikshitar seated in a granite *mandapam* of

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

the *Jalakanteshwarar* temple surrounded by students and spotted deer, and explaining, say, the *Sri Varadaraja stavam*, or the *Kuvalaya anandam* which has served as a formal textbook on poetics across the nation for several centuries.

However, his most potent work, at least for me, is a later composition, the *Aatma arpana stuti*, wherein, very surprisingly, Appayya Dikshitar laments, “*ahaha jananam vyarthayami!*” “Alas, have squandered this life!”

Perhaps, he composed the *Aatmaarpanstuti* right here on this campus. Why do I say this? Along the eastern edge of the road winding past Appayya’s pond, there used to be, until ten or fifteen years ago, a number of wild datura plants with their attractive purple-white flowers. He would certainly have gathered those and offered it to Shiva Dhandeeshwara.



One day, late in his life, Appayya Dikshitar announced to his disciples that he had partaken a potion of *datura* or *unmata* flowers to test himself. And he asked them to make note of his utterances in the intoxicated state, and thus the *Atmarpana Stuti* came to be. It is also called the *Unmata Panchashati*, which

might be translated by an Audrey Truschke as “Fifty Shades of Insanity!”

Hallucinogenic drugs, we now know, are not really new here! Of course, not all of us do cry out “*Ahaha jananam vyarthayami!*”¹⁴

Carelessly, I translated it initially as “Alas, I have squandered this life.” But please note, Appayya does not declare, *Jeevanam vyarthayami*. Instead he chooses to say *Jananam*. To our ears, grown accustomed to the gruesome sounds of English, why does it sound strange to listen to Appayya’s lament as “Alas, I have wasted this birth?” Surely, therein lies a hint as to how we may, at IIT Madras, shape our institution, translate our work for the broader set of nameless stakeholders and live our own individual lives.

The great Sage, Sri Adi Shankara in his *Bhaja Govindam*, famously sang “*Punarapi Jananam, punarapi maranam.*” Over millenia, in this land of ours, we have come to realize the value of being born a human. As a human, one could have the desire, the discipline, the discrimination, the dedication and the devotion to release oneself from endless birth and death. This ability is rightly considered uniquely human. Instead, if we too lived the uninhibited feral life of a

¹⁴ *Just to feed the belly, published many a paper in predatory/journals for miscellaneous benefits./By offering remnants of such lowly enterprise at your lotus feet/I am guilty, Oh, Lord!!! Aatmaarpanastuti, 48. This could well be the lament of the Academy.*

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

beast, so said the ancients, it was a birth laid waste, verily an opportunity lost, for one knows not when this privilege of a human birth is to be had.

One of my favorite essayists, the literary critic, Guy Davenport, wrote in his essay on Archilochos that “the history of civilization is the history of attention.”¹⁵ In Indic civilization, considerable attention is paid to the very fact of *jananam*, with the simple (yet not easy) intent that life be lived in accord with sustainable principles, right from birth, if not conception. This notion of sustainability is what we know as *Dharma*.

As an institution of technology, certainly, we must pause and ponder: “how indeed does our technology sustain us on this planet and all the multifarious beings born on our earth.” How does technology direct our attention and thus, our lives? Interestingly, this is now a question being debated in the boardrooms of, say, Apple, Facebook, and Google, to name a few. Our west-facing deities, with distant eyes, will awaken, for the Silicon Valley *suprabhatham* has been sung.

While it is fashionable to talk of the environmental impact of technology, or the social construction of science, should we not consider the deeper philosophical, and even cosmological, implications of our technology? How do we fashion for ourselves a technology that enables us to strengthen this attention,

¹⁵ *The fox knows many/the hedgehog one/solid trick.*//

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

this intent that has sustained our civilization for millennia? In essence, I call for a critical shift in both intention and attention from the fast fads of technology to fashioning anew technologies to restore and sustain Planet Earth.

How do we do this? Shall we copy the Samurai of Tokugawa Japan and give up the gun, and melt the cannon balls to make a smiling Buddha? Or do we don a Gandhi *topi* and sing *Swadeshi*? Or shall we proclaim “Small is Beautiful” and embrace Schumacher from the swinging Sixties? Or yet still, do we shamelessly modify and elevate *Jugaad* as the glorious pinnacle of our *Niti* in the new age?

“*Neti, Neti, Neti!*” declared our forefathers when questioning themselves.

There are no immediate or easy answers. Do remember that a young Nachiketas stood steadfast at the doors of death for three days. Even Yama’s offer of swift chariots, and divine damsels did not distract him. Silicon Valley stock options are not what we need. Ultimately, what is needed, (and may Appayya Dikshitar shower us with his grace!) is a new poetics informing and emerging from a new praxis: a poetics of *Shleshha*, in technology. Not necessarily a new *Dandiniva Kavyaadarsha*, but a *Dandiniva tantra-darsha*.

What role does historically informed thinking have in this new poetics of technology? History is always about the present-ing the past, and thus about the future, and to be truly meaningful, history is simultaneously philosophy. I would

Change and Continuity: Unit Vectors of the Campus Chronotope.

R.Srinivasan1@gmail.com

suggest that the fruit of history might well contain the metaphysical seeds for the technological experiments we undertake, so that as individuals, and as an institution, we direct our attention towards that which reveals our true self. For those of us mired in the Maya of Macaulay, the scholarship of Heinrich Zimmer, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, and Stella Kramrisch from nearly a hundred years ago is a viable way out of the muddle in this search for a new poetics and praxis of technology. Eventually, we shall rediscover, if our intent is true, that the “Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid” is, in fact, a *Poorna-kumbham*!¹⁶

In closing, we know that even in the recent past, this very campus has been home to many a seeker and many a *Siddha*. Paul Brunton in his book “A Search in Secret India” wrote of anchorites on the south bank of the Adyar. Indeed, among all the IITs, this one alone still has the perceptible presence of the timeless.

Therefore, following the footsteps of Appayya Dikshitar, if some of us, (faculty, students, staff, and alumni) were to similarly conclude: “*ahaha jananam vyarthayami,*” could it herald a renaissance? Would such a rebirth lead IIT to a new high? We could either wallow in the Pappadam Pond or plunge in the Yama *Theertham*. The future is ours to build. May the gods bless us all!

Om! Shanti! Shanti!! Shantihi!!!

¹⁶ C.K. Prahalad charmed corporate India with his satchetization strategy.