Advanced Workshop on Social Theory 1

“Contemporary Social Theory: Life, Labour and Caste”

Resource Person:
Dr. Saumyabrata Chaudhuri, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU

The three main currents discussed in the Workshop were bio-politics and analyses of bio-power originating from Michel Foucault’s researches in the 1970s and 1980s; then, Italian social thought initiated by the autonomist school including Paolo Virno, Antonio Negri, etc. that dealt with new forms of labour in the global economy; and in relation to the above, certain fresh perspectives on the implications of caste in labour in Indian Social history, based on a reading of Rupa Vishwanath’s work. The overall orientation of the workshop was to locate the nodes of intensity where theoretical abstraction and historical materiality come together in the site of research and investigation. These nodes of intensity could be called “problems” and to that extent, social theory responds to a history of problems before being presented as a discourse of sociology. To clarify this line of thinking, a series of confrontations and negotiations were tried out with the privileged locus of so-called scientific theory whose paradigms are the natural sciences. One interesting “problem” that the workshop unravelled, up to a point, a problem traversing a diagonal between natural objectivity and socio-historical problematization – was that of “life”. The ongoing efforts of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben were found to be greatly useful for this traversal. Based on the analytic and problem of “life”, a set of forays became possible into the delimited domains of labour and caste so as to open them upto new political proposals.