

## **ABSTRACTS**

### **KEYNOTE SPEAKER**

**Prof. Sumathi Ramaswamy**

Professor of History and Director of the Duke Center for South Asian Studies

**Image and Affect in the Reign of English the Dalit Goddess**

### **SPEAKERS**

**Dr. Kopal Gautam**

Teacher and Academic Tutor, Department of Literature, Film, & Theatre Studies, University of Essex

**“Gods on the Screen”: The Theme of Veneration in Hindi Science Fiction Films**

The concept of veneration in Hindu culture has carried on from primordial times into the twenty-first century. Devotion and faith combined with ritualistic praying to a deity can be found in the earliest text of the Vedic civilization, *The Rig Veda*, as well as in contemporary forms of popular visual culture. With the emergence of the Bhakti movement in medieval India, veneration acquired a new meaning as the movement started the cult of the sharing of love between the God and the devotee. This reciprocal relationship between the deity and the devotee has become a dominant motif in Hindi films. From films belonging to the mythological genre such as *Jai Santoshi Maa* to the televised versions of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, gods have maintained a constant presence in the collective psyche and their presence on the screen has been seen as a form of *darsana*. Even in films that do not directly draw upon the mythological and religious themes, gods are constantly evoked and worshipped by characters in order to find solutions to their problems. Visits to the temple and performance of prayers are motifs that are omnipresent in Hindi films. In the twenty-first century, with the foray of Hindi film producers into the genre of science fiction, worshipping the gods have acquired a new significance. Films such as *Koi Mil Gaya*, *Krrish* and *Ra.One* provide examples of how developments in science and technology are intrinsically linked with belief in religion and veneration of Hindu deities. This paper explores the significance of rituals, prayers and miracles that bind the protagonist and the deities in a reciprocal relationship in contemporary Hindi science fiction films.

**Dr. Roos Gerritsen**

Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg

**Vexed Veneration: The Ambiguous Adulation of a South Indian Movie Star and the A/Effective Power of Images**



In this paper I explore the politics of public veneration in Tamil Nadu, India. Fan clubs of movie stars display their fandom with ubiquitous posters and gigantic banners and murals, diverting Tamil Nadu's cityscapes. While it has repeatedly been argued that the cine-political entanglements in Tamil Nadu, where several movie stars commenced political careers, have resulted in unquestioned devotion by fans and supporters, the display of imagery in public spaces demands a more complex understanding of veneration and affect. The images are put up by local party supporters and Tamil film fan clubs that widely resort to the visual to publicize their leaders/stars in urban space. A crucial point of display is the visual presence not only of the venerated star but also of the supporters and fans who display these images. Recent changes in materiality from painted billboards to digitally designed vinyl banners have enhanced the a/effective power of public display by the *presencing* of their producers. By investigating the image practices of fans of movie star Rajinikanth I aim to move beyond the unidirectionality of adulation that is often ascribed to fans. Rajinikanth did not start a political career (yet), to the disappointment of many of his fans. The ways in which fans worship Rajinikanth as a movie star and at the same time develop a sense of frustration about his staying out of politics reveal an ambiguity, which is the subject of this paper. I am interested in the question of how publicness, repetition and scale inform modes of worship as played out by Rajinikanth fans in their public display of images. At the same time I am interested in the heightened moments of ambiguity as these explicitly articulated moments reveal discourses about visuality, worship and fandom in the daily life worlds of fans.

**Dr. Seema Khanwalkar**

Visiting Faculty, CEPT University, Ahmedabad

**Gauri Bharat**

Lecturer, Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University; PhD Candidate, School of World Art & Museology, University of East Anglia



**Worship of a Pedestrian Kind: Roadside Shrines and Their Changing Significance in Ahmedabad, India**

This paper is an attempt to understand ‘veneration’ as an assertion, a new kind of thrust through ever-growing numbers of roadside shrines in the urban landscape of Ahmedabad in India. Located at street corners, on busy streets, on important roads, and abutting buildings, these shrines of various lesser (often unknown) gods and goddesses are not mere assertions of the lower castes or the down trodden, but embed narratives which state that ‘we belong here’ and that our venerations cannot be questioned – either by law or by any other community. The shrines become pronouncements of the presence of particular communities in the urban sphere rather than about religious beliefs. The paper seeks to understand the spatial marking of these shrines in relation to the divine character and ritual practices that take place in them. The deities in the shrines are usually lesser (often unknown) gods and goddesses but interestingly borrow from larger religious narratives both in iconography and mythology. Over time, they assume significance as protectors and saviours for people who pass by everyday and eventually develop a routine of prayer and worship. Thus ensconced among local communities and having a well established group of followers, the law is helpless in governing or even dis-allowing the shrines from growing. Through the phenomenon of the shrines, veneration takes on a new political overtone, not only in Ahmedabad but in most parts of India.

**Aparajita Mukhopadhyay**

PhD Candidate, Department of History, SOAS

**Imagining Land: Railway Travel and Territory in Colonial India**

As is well known imagination of the nation as a single geographical unit has played a significant role in engendering nationalism. This paper aims to explore the historical roots of seeing, imagining and venerating the nation through railway travel in colonial India. The introduction of steam communication in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century transformed the way people travelled in India and offered an unprecedented opportunity to move from one part of the country to another with relative speed; ease and safety. Railway travel made 'seeing' and imagining India possible in ways which could be both concrete and complimentary or contradictory to textual [books, maps] knowledge. Railway journeys transformed the imagination of a geographical entity called '*desh*' into a tangible experience. Travelling afforded an opportunity to imagine land while 'seeing' it. It thus played a crucial role in the conceptualisation of territory in colonial India. But the role of railway in 'seeing *desh*' and its impact on territorial conceptualisations has not been explored yet. This paper will focus on the ways in which territorial and affective boundaries were experienced and imagined through a critical analysis of a series of travelogues written by the Indian railway travellers in the mid -19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Admittedly, most of these texts were products of '*desh bhraman*' or travelling around the country. Taking this as an entry-point, the paper will engage with the territorial conceptualisation of '*desh*' as expressed in these travelogues. Among other things, it will attempt to answer the following questions: what was the geographical dimension of the nation as imagined in these texts? Did this image complement or contradict the extant territorial conceptualisation of India? And, did the 'seeing' of land add new aspects to the imagination of the nation in colonial India? Answers to these questions are expected to underline the historical processes through which the nation came to be experienced; imagined and invested with sentimental feelings [venerated]; and the implications of these processes on India.

**Sukanya Sarbadhikary**

PhD Candidate, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

**Ingestion as Affect, Empathy and Experience of the *Desh* among Sahajiya-Vaishnavas of Bengal**

In this paper I wish to explore complex interplays among corporeality, affectivity and community-formation, through the lens of tantric ingestion rituals practised by sahajiya-Vaishnavas of Bengal. My analyses are based on intensive fieldwork carried out among sahajiyas of Navadvip, one of Bengal's most important Vaishnava devotional centres. Sahajiya practices have strong resemblances with South Asian tantric traditions, but they claim to be Vaishnavas and thus frame their rituals within an orthodox Vaishnava discourse. Sahajiyas are intensely repudiated by both elite Bengalis and mainstream Vaishnava practitioners, because they associate sahajiyas with 'filthy' ingestion practices and 'illicit' sexual relationships. Textual studies of tantrism have mostly only *described* tantric rituals, which lead to further consolidation of these otherising opinions. I argue however, that if sahajiya practices are understood within their own conceptual paradigms, they not only do not appear exotic, but their practices also apprehend more general and shared affective dispositions. Sahajiyas consider their bodies to be microcosmic reflections of the macrocosm and equate their elemental constitution with that of creation. Earth, water, and fire for instance, translate in their cosmology as faeces, urine and semen/menstrual blood/female sexual fluid. They emphasise that internalisation, rather than evacuation of excreta, leads to cosmic balance, bodily health and physical beauty. Their ingestion practice is literally known as *panca-raser upasana* (worship of five body-substances). Sahajiya ingestion rituals, I argue, are also embodied models of community-formation in four distinctive ways, conceptualised within affective paradigms of empathy, exchange, subservience, and femininity. First, body-fluids are universal phenomenological components and by internalising them, sahajiyas say they experience essential sameness and primal empathic connectedness with others. Second, they exchange body-substances within themselves for ingestion purposes, to render efficacious their principles of communitarian empathy. Third, generalised empathy leads to a sense of subservience towards body-constituents and subservience/deference are essential for community-maintenance. Fourth, subservience they argue is best embodied by ideals of femininity. As penetration is the hallmark of maleness, and absorption, the paradigm of femininity, thus ingestion rituals engender sahajiyas' absorptive, feminine subjectivities. Thus excretion and absorption, externality and internality, universal experiential conditions, I argue, become significant means of sahajiyas' relatedness with the community and world.

**Closing Discussion with Dr. Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay & Prof. Christopher Pinney**

Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (Goldsmiths Centre for Cultural Studies) and Christopher Pinney (UCL Anthropology Material & Visual Culture) will discuss Mukhopadhyay's research on the veneration of the female body (*qua desh*) as an erotic ideal in the contemporary cyber-pornography of 'Desi Fat Aunty Porn', as well as the broader questions and perspectives of 'veneration' brought forth by conference speakers.