

INDIA: A VENERATION NATION?

**DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON,
On Tuesday 12 June 2012, from 10:00 to 17:30.**

CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Registration: This event is free and open to the public but registration is required.
Contact jill.reese.09@ucl.ac.uk to register to attend.

Organisers: Urmila Mohan
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Summary: This one-day conference at the UCL department of anthropology critically examines India through the lens of a “Veneration Nation”—a country with thriving and recursive cultures of adulatory practices and aesthetics. By looking at contemporary research on India that invoke ideas of ritual, spectacle, prayer, and affectivity we hope to interrogate and extend the application of analytic categories of ‘religion’, ‘politics’ and ‘embodiment’. The conference will be accompanied by an exhibition based on private collections, a film screening and a web publication. In the interests of highlighting new and emerging work on this subject, the speakers will include post-fieldwork PhD students and postdoctoral researchers as well as established academics.

Why Veneration? The Oxford English Dictionary defines veneration as “a feeling of deep respect and reverence directed towards some person or thing.” Common assumptions of the term ‘veneration’ simplify it as reverence for a religious deity or object, or gloss it as a synonym of ‘devotion’ or ‘idolisation’. The etymology of the word ‘venerate’ is from the Latin *venerātus* and *venerārī*, “to reverence, worship, venerate”, and from *venus* and *veneris*, “love, sexual desire, loveliness, attractiveness, beauty, charm”, which is cognate with Sanskrit *vānati*, “(he) loves, attains”. This etymology indicates a connection between corporeality, emotions and efficacy that we wish to explore and critique in the context of India. We suggest that our efforts are part of the study of emotive, affective and sensational forms and their visual and material incorporation in religion and politics.

In unpacking the term, we find both theoretical and methodological utility in accessing, interrogating and mobilising ‘veneration’ in its diverse forms and practices within religious contexts and beyond, as it works upon multiple forms of logic including the linguistic and discursive, spatio-temporal and visual, somatic and material. These include its ability to bind not only devotee and deity, but also communities as a whole as a process of mediation in the assembling (or ‘reassembling’) of communities or nations. While veneration may imply a hierarchical relationship between supplicant and the venerated, it is not always a mono-directional transaction. In both religious and political contexts, veneration is a practice that binds devotee/citizen and deity/leader in a relationship of reciprocity and obligation.

We propose that veneration can be mobilised in a range of contexts and that the reasons that make the intimacy of religio-political and somatic domains in India possible are worth researching through the efficacious uses of images and materials. We will explore this against a backdrop of the implications of ‘Hinduism’, the contemporary relevance of Indic terms, ethno-sociological models, colonialism and indigenous modernity. While these discussions may focus on India we argue that their significance extends to wider issues like the relevance of analytical categories in anthropology and the emergence of concepts like Indian ‘dividuals’ that have been comparatively applied elsewhere in the world.

*This event is funded by the UCL Department of Anthropology Research and Reading Group Fund.

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UCL Anthropology

- 10:00-10:30** Registration
- 10:30-10:45** Introduction to Conference
- 10:45-11:40** **Keynote Address**
Image and Affect in the Reign of English the Dalit Goddess
Sumathi Ramaswamy, Duke University Center for South Asian Studies
- 11:40-12:00** Coffee/Tea Break
- 12:00-12:30** **Worship of a Pedestrian Kind: Roadside Shrines and Their Changing Significance in Ahmedabad, India**
Seema Khanwalkar, CEPT University Ahmedabad, and Gauri Bharat, CEPT University; PhD Candidate, University of East Anglia School of World Art & Museology. Presented by Gauri Bharat
- 12:30-13:00** **Imagining Land: Railway Travel and Territory in Colonial India**
Aparajita Mukhopadhyay, PhD Candidate, SOAS History
- 13:00-14:00** Catered Lunch Break
- 13:15 Film Screening: **When The Gods Came Down to Earth**
Video Installation by Srinivas Krishna
- 13:35 Film Screening: **Wagah**
Short Documentary by Supriyo Sen
- 14:00-14:30** **“Gods on the Screen”: The Theme of Veneration in Hindi Science Fiction Films**
Kopal Gautam, University of Essex Literature, Film, & Theatre Studies
- 14:30-15:00** **Vexed Veneration: The Ambiguous Adulation of a South Indian Movie Star and the A/Effective Power of Images**
Roos Gerritsen, University of Heidelberg Anthropology
- 15:00-15:20** Coffee/Tea Break
- 15:20-15:50** **Ingestion as Affect, Empathy, and Experience of the *Desh* among Sahajiya-Vaishnavas of Bengal**
Sukanya Sarbadhikary, PhD Candidate, Cambridge Anthropology
- 15:50-16:30** **Closing Discussion with Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay & Sumathi Ramaswamy with Moderation by Christopher Pinney**
Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay (Goldsmiths Centre for Cultural Studies) will introduce and discuss with Christopher Pinney (UCL Anthropology Material & Visual Culture) and Sumathi Ramaswamy his recent research on the veneration of the female body (*qua desh*) as an erotic ideal in the contemporary cyber-pornography of ‘Desi Fat Auntie Porn’, as well as the broader questions and perspectives of ‘veneration’ brought forth by conference speakers.
- 16:30-17:30** Wine Reception
Film Screening: **Sita Sings the Blues**
Mixed Media Animated Video by Nina Paley