

**Sati and Sovereignty: Colonial Power, Indian Authority and Female Agency in Rajputana, 1830-1860.**

Dr Andrea Major  
University of Leeds

Sati, the immolation of a Hindu widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, is perhaps one of the most iconic and most controversial forms of public death in South Asia. It has been a site on which contested constructions of religion, tradition and identity have come into conflict with ideas of secularism, human rights and gender justice, as well as with the political imperatives of the colonial and postcolonial state. In the mid nineteenth century the East India Company, having outlawed sati in its own territories in 1829, turned its attention to the practice as it existed in the princely states, especially the Rajput and Maratha states of North-West India. There sati not only continued to be legal, but as the mass immolations of queens, concubines and slaves on the death of many Indian rulers and nobles attest, was revered at the highest level of society. Sati had always had a political dimension in the Rajput and Maratha states, of course, as these public immolations were tied both to the internal power struggles of the zenana and the outward prestige of the ruling lineage. In the period 1830-1860 they took on new political significance, however, as the colonial state pressured Indian rulers to prohibit the sacrifices, while the Indian princes sought to resist or negotiate this imposition on their sovereignty as independent rulers under the system of subsidiary alliance. This paper explores how the public death of women as satis in these states became the pretext for a renegotiation of the nature of colonial power and influence in the princely states and of the way in which colonial observers understood the practice of sati itself. It argues that exposure to Rajput interpretations of sati, combined with colonial preconceptions about what it meant to be Rajput led to a reconfiguration of the colonial ideas on sati that replaced the helpless Bengali widow with the self-determined Rajput heroine as the archetypal sati, reinserting the widow agency and making her the author rather than the victim of sati. In doing so it provides an alternate historical context for understanding debates about sati in postcolonial India, demonstrating the continuities between these and the colonial discourse as it emerged in Rajputana rather than in Bengal

**Popular Death in Maharashtra: Narratives and Replications**

Irina Glushkova

Center for Indian Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow

By “popular death”, I mean the one that is appealing to people’s tastes, curiosity, political purposes and other ends. Therefore it is narrated and replicated now and then, irrespective of many centuries passed by since it actually happened. To be referred to in this way, death should be associated with a personality who forms an intrinsic part of national culture. In the context of Maharashtra, Dnyaneshvar, a saint-poet of the 13<sup>th</sup>

century, and Shivaji, a 17<sup>th</sup> century warrior and ruler, are the figures still profoundly spoken about and discussed in public.

The (most probably, natural) death of Dnyaneshvar was transformed into a legend of his eternal life in the underground cave. Later on it resulted in erection of an important temple complex of the saint's *samadhi* in the village of Alandi which became an object of spiritual and intellectual veneration. Shivaji's brilliant raise to power, and even "the dawn of [Marathas'] national independence" (as per Jadunath Sarkar's remark) are linked to his killing of Afzal Khan, a general of Bijapur sultanate, during their "diplomatic" rendezvous. The fort of Pratapgad whose glorious history is related to this event and which houses the tomb of Afzal Khan, also became the venue of new meanings attached to this story then and later.

Altogether, both deaths (one of a "good" guy, another of a "bad" guy) have turned into objects of various speculations and entered an arena of verbal and visual manifestations, including poetry, historical novels, comics, movies and political banners on which I plan to dwell in detail. This will, eventually, lead to finding out the feelings both deaths evoke in various groups and communities, and the purposes these sentiments are stirred for.

### **Stories of 'martyrs' in the Maha Gujarat movement**

Riho Isaka

The University of Tokyo

This paper attempts to examine how stories of 'martyrs' were narrated in movements for the formation of linguistic states in India. It particularly focuses on the case of the Maha Gujarat movement, which, along with the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, led to the bifurcation of Bombay State in 1960. The Maha Gujarat movement began to gain momentum in 1956, when the Indian government announced its decision to form a bilingual Bombay State, against which demonstrations were held in Ahmedabad by those demanding a separate state for the Gujaratis. In their attempt to control the situation, the police opened fire and killed several students, which in turn caused serious disturbances in the city. The Maha Gujarat Janata Parishad was formed soon afterward and it repeatedly invoked the memory of the 'sacrifice' of these students, to mobilise public support for the movement and also to question the legitimacy of the Congress government which had used violence toward the people. This paper closely analyses concepts and expressions used by the leaders of the Parishad in their narratives of 'martyrs', while also examining the stories of the same incident presented by the state and central governments, which seemingly began to change toward the end of the 1950s. It aims to show how these different narratives of the same deaths reflected the contemporary social and political context in which the dominant discourses of the nation and the states within the nation were constantly reconstructed.

## **Finding the Nation in Assassination: The Death of SWRD Bandaranaike and the Assertion of a Sinhalese Sri Lankan Identity**

Ian Barrow

Middlebury College, USA

Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike's assassination in Colombo on Friday, September 25, 1959 came as a complete surprise. From the time he had come to power in 1956, there had been periods of political and social unrest, but no one expected a direct attack on the Prime Minister. Despite the growing troubles, Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, was still regarded as an example of a successful multi-ethnic, multi-religious state. Fearing nothing, Bandaranaike refused to live in the official residence and instead continued to live in his private home. And so that morning, as had happened many times in the past, the few guards at the gate allowed an eclectic group of petitioners to enter the grounds and wait on the veranda. At a little past nine o'clock, one of the visitors, a Buddhist monk named Talduwa Somarama, approached the Prime Minister, took out a revolver from under his robes and fired several rounds. Bandaranaike was hit in the chest, stumbled into the house, collapsed and died the next day.

In retrospect, Bandaranaike's assassination is perhaps not so surprising given that those who plotted his death were part of an increasingly violent movement to have the national identity be Sinhalese in character. Somarama was part of a conspiracy that was motivated by a complex, but potent, mix of personal disappointment with Bandaranaike, a belief that assassination would advance the political fortunes of a member of cabinet, and a growing contempt for the Prime Minister. The conspirators interpreted Bandaranaike's recent political decisions as a reneging on earlier promises to champion Sinhalese language and Buddhist religious policies that were increasingly seen as the foundation for a new national identity. This presentation will examine the reasons behind the assassination and also discuss how the official museum in honour of Bandaranaike interprets his role in shaping the identity of the new nation.

## **Sarita's Suicide: Sexual Violence, Public Death and the Gendered State in contemporary India**

Debotri Dhar

Rutgers University, USA

On April 10 2008, Sarita, a woman in her early twenties and a mother of two daughters aged three and six, was raped by two policemen at a police station in Haryana, India. Despite the filing of a complaint, the identification of the accused and a prima facie establishment of rape, there was a delay in taking action against the accused, who not only continued in duty but also began to threaten the victim to withdraw her case. On June 9 2008, unable to bear the trauma anymore, Sarita staged a spectacular public death, consuming poison within the Haryana police headquarters and leaving behind an evocative suicide note.

This paper attempts to situate the critical moment of Sarita's suicide within a larger androcentric nation. By tracing the events that precede as well as succeed the suicide,

I attempt to interrogate the meanings inscribed upon women's private bodies and their embodiment as public culture in contemporary India. I will demonstrate how in this case, the public death of the sexually violated female body-in-culture mobilizes a powerful postcolonial identity-politics that both affirms and challenges liberal conceptions of 'the state'.

### **Naxalism and the "Politics of the dead body" in Bihar**

Nicolas Jaoul

CNRS/IRIS (EHESS), Paris

This paper does not deal directly with official death rituals, but does so indirectly through the popular appropriation/imitation of state rituals, that is witnessed in public mourning ceremonies and commemorations of deceased leaders and activists organized by political parties. The ethnographic material has been collected in the Naxalite movement of Bihar. The CPI-ML "Liberation" is a Naxalite faction that reverted to legal means of struggle, forsaking armed struggle in favor of a mass based movement (including electoral participation, trade unionism, student politics, agrarian movement, etc.) in the early 1990s. It nevertheless faced severe repression at the hands of the Landlords' private militias, especially the Ranvir Sena in the 1990s. The party's politics of glorification of its assassinated activists, has led to produce martyrdom narratives and symbolic politics, like putting up statues and monuments in their memory. Therefore, the party has adopted a symbolic function, challenging the monopoly of the state. The ethnographic material highlights the role assigned to the dead body of the martyr as an attempt to produce an idealised class subject of the rural proletariat and to entrench the party's presence in the locality both symbolically and physically. Focusing more precisely on two case studies that were specially highlighted by the party (Chandra Shekhar, the student leader from Siwan, and Manju Devi, the feminist peasant leader of Arwal, whose statues were erected recently), I will reflect on the political imaginary of the dead body in the Naxalite movement, which seems influenced both by the official culture of the state and by the local culture.

### **"Farmers' Suicides and the State in India: A case study from Wayanad, Kerala"**

Daniel Münster

Department of Social Anthropology, Halle University

In India, up to 200,000 farmers (numbers vary according to sources) have officially been recognized as having committed suicide due to economic reasons or agrarian crisis since 1999. While the realities behind these incidences are rooted in complex agrarian histories and individual life histories, I want to treat farmers' suicides as public events. Given the high regional and individual variation in causes motivation and morphology of suicides, farmers' suicides appear only in their treatment as a politicised issue in the media, among activists and politicians as a unitary object. It may be argued that farmers' suicides have become a category of state intervention, indeed a category of people that attain visibility only through the state's enumerative and classificatory

apparatus. This category in turn is the prerequisite for a segment of the population to approach the state at the local level for assistance/compensation. The farmers earn entitlement to state care through their death – a sort of posthumous citizenship. The paper will focus on Wayanad District in Kerala and is based on ethnographic data. I want to map the arena of state interventions after farmers' suicides: the declaration of 31 districts in India as "suicide prone districts" and the bundle of relief packages and compensations available in these districts. The larger set of questions that interest me are: What kind of challenge to economic nationalism is these large scale public deaths 'from below'? May these suicides be interpreted as 'suicides against the state'? How is responsibility (or blame) for these deaths negotiated? Why is the dead peasant politically charged when compared to other subaltern deaths?

### **The "Dead and Their Double Duties": Mourning, Melancholia, and the Martyred Intellectual Memorials in Bangladesh**

Nayanika Mookherjee

Lancaster University, UK

Memorialization of valor and losses through war memorials unquestioningly presume that material objects stand for and embody memory. In exploring this relationship, this article focuses on the evocation of mourning and melancholia in the annual commemorations at the site of two war memorials dedicated to the Martyred Intellectuals of the Bangladesh War of 1971. Following a discussion of the increased ethnographic reconceptualization of culture in spatialized ways, the article examines the role of the built environment in simulating an emotional experience for its visitors. The article argues that the different evocations of mourning and melancholia at these memorials are a reflection of the middle-class aesthetics and the political trajectory of Bangladesh since the 1971 war and in the present. This highlights the links among memorialization, the current socio-political condition, differing practices and responses of the visitors, and the historicity of the urban spaces in which the memorials are situated.