

### **Panel 13**

#### **Religion, Literature and Film in South Asia and the South Asian Diaspora**

#### **21 European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies**

**Bonn July 2010**

**Convener Dr. Diana Dimitrova, Michigan State University, USA**

#### **Panelists (in order of presentation)**

Dr. Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar  
Olivier Bougnot and Dr. Anne Castaing  
Dr. Laetitia Zecchini  
Rashi Rohatgi  
Dr. Annie Montaut  
Dr. Guzel Strelkova  
Kerry San Chirico  
Dr. Diana Dimitrova  
Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay  
Dr. Sunny Singh

#### **Abstracts (in order of presentation)**

#### **Folk Deities, Tigers and Mortals: Life in the Mangrove Swamps of the Sundarbans**

**Dr. Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar**

**West Bengal State University, West Bengal, India**

The Sundarbans - located in southern West Bengal, India and south-western Bangladesh - remains synonymous with the Royal Bengal tiger and to some extent its mangrove forest unique to South Asia. The riverine forests with unique physical features offered a tough proposition to human habitation through ages. In fact, battling with hostilities of nature was so overwhelming an aspect of the settlers' lives that it led to evolution of deities to whom they could seek refuge psychologically during difficult times.

The focus of this essay is on forms of religious practices in the Sundarbans and their representation in traditional literature. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there thrived a *punthi* (Bengali verse) literature devoted to gods and goddesses of the region. It catered to and arose from psychological needs of lowest and marginal elements of the population. There evolved a common cult standing apart from orthodox Hinduism and Islam. With relevance in the context of Richard Eaton's work on Islam on the Bengal frontier, this paper will attempt to address this unique position and offer a qualified acknowledgement of the prevailing framework.

The texts dealt with here are the following:

i) The *Raimangal* eulogizing the tiger god Dakshin Ray was written in the year 1686 by Krishna Ram Das. Later it was edited and published by Satyanarayan Bhattacharya on behalf of the Calcutta University. There is also an incomplete undated manuscript of the *Raimangal* by Rudradev. This was published in the *Sahitya Prakasika*, Vol. V, *Dwadash Mangal*, ed. Panchanan Mondal, Santiniketan, 1966.

ii) The *Ghazi-Kalu-Champavati-Kanyar-Punthi* was composed by Abdur Rahim. The date of composition is unknown. But reference to the sub-division in which the author was born makes it clear that the text could not have been written before the Mutiny. It was presumably a late nineteenth-century *punthi*.

iii) The *Banabibi Jahuranama* is about the mother goddess Banabibi. This was composed by Banayuddin in the year 1877. There is another version of the tale by Marhum Munshi Muhammad Khater entitled *Banabibi Jahuranama* written in 1287 B.S., *Kartik*, i.e. 1880. These texts are all written in simple verse. It is well known that the people chanted some verses before they entered the forest so that no danger would befall them.

### **Defining our Enemy: National Consciousness and Communal Persistence in Hindi and Bengali Literature**

**Olivier Bougnot & Dr. Anne Castaing**

**INALCO – Paris, France**

This paper aims at questioning the persistence and the transformation of communal reflexes at work in Hindi and Bengali literature from the mid- XIXth century, examining the close and paradoxical links existing between the building of a nation based on unity and the stigmatization or the evacuation of the Muslim. If some recent works identify explicit communalist discourses in XIXth century literature (Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Harishchandra Bhartendu) and early XXth century literature (Maithili Sharan Gupt), this paper is concerned by the transformation of these “explicit discourses” into “implicit discourses”, as occurred from the mid-1920’s, when they are contradicted by the unitary fervour inspired by Gandhi and the Congress Party. Simultaneously, it explores the crystallisation of the feeling of “enmity” brought about by Partition, which converted a former “stigmatized” Muslim into a “guilty” Muslim. In this regard, Rabindranath Tagore’s and Agyeya’s stories will display the ambivalence between the authors’ explicit discourses and the text’s implicit communalism.

**Bhakti in the modern mode: the filiations claimed by contemporary Indian poetry**  
**Dr. Laetitia Zecchini**  
**INALCO- Paris, France**

The paper aims at exploring how contemporary Indian poetry in English and in Hindi *translates*, both literally and figuratively, the bhakti tradition and the bhakti texts. The paper will focus on the reinterpretation of the two towering figures of Tukaram and Kabir and their relevance in the works of Kedarnath Singh in Hindi, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre or Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in English. What are the terms of this dialogic interaction between medieval and modern voices? What affinities with the bhakti poets, whose voices have often been reconstructed as subaltern, do contemporary poets choose to foreground? Is the religious dimension lost or silenced to "this-wordly" preoccupations? The central experience of alienation and otherness in bhakti poetry, the directness and the ecstasy of these voices, their irreverence, inappropriateness and resistance to a "dividable" truth, the marginality, itinerancy and unhomeliness of the *sants* and *varkaris*, but also their restless experimentation with language seem particularly significant to contemporary poets.

**The Construction of a New Mauritian Hinduism in the Poetry of Abhimanyu Unnuth**  
**Rashi Rohatgi**  
**SOAS, London, UK**

Abhimanyu Unnuth is the most well known Mauritian poet writing in Hindi. His works are a response to and an expression of Indo-Mauritian self-understanding in the years after the struggle for independence (obtained in 1968), during which unification of the community under the auspices of religion and language was instrumental in obtaining a largely peaceful independence. The poems grapple with the sufferings faced by the community's laboring ancestors as well as the meaning that such suffering can have in light of the shortcomings Unnuth witnessed in Mauritius in the 1980s: poverty, hunger, exploitation, and political obfuscation. Classically Hindu concepts- questions and characters from the epics and the puranas- are juxtaposed with post-colonial questions of what heaven and higher power mean. Through these juxtapositions, Unnuth comes to conclusions about what his Hinduism and the Hinduism of a new generation of Indo-Mauritians can be. In the end, his choice of language- Hindi, the religious vernacular for Indo-Mauritian Hindus but the daily language of very few- renders him less effective than writers in English, French, or Creole at reaching his audience, but, I would argue, more effective at illustrating the power of religion not only to react against traditional understandings of Hinduism on the island but to transcend them. Exploring the way Unnuth has, with his re-remembrance of the Mauritian laboring soul, redefined Hinduism for a new generation of Indo-Mauritians, brings a new dimension to Unnuth's poetry for non-Mauritian readers.

**On Two Interpretations of Marginality in Contemporary Literature and Art**  
**Dr. Annie Montaut,**  
**INALCO, Paris, France**

The very notion of margin is intrinsically ambivalent..On one hand, the now prevailing meaning of the term, used since the early eighties as a constructive concept by the various trends of cultural studies, takes for granted a vision of the world society as a field once structured around a more or less stabilized centre reigning over its voiceless (yet not devoid of agency) margins, the latter more and more claiming for a de-centred identity in a general struggle for legitimacy. Transposed on the South Asian scene, such an agonistic model seems particularly fit for analysing the so-called ‘dalit’ literatures, particularly in Indian languages, as well as radical works voicing a claim against high cast/class hegemony. On the other hand, the notion of marginality is traditionnally connected with the figure of the sadhu right from the early shastras. A paradox admitted by the anthropologist Louis Dumont and made central by Madeleine Biardeau’s reading of Hindu society. The sadhu, who stands at the indeterminable limes of society, both inside and outside of it, the true ‘*tatasth*’ (lit. on the river bank: belonging to neither here nor there) is at the same time the one outside the varnas, beyond the whole social architecture, and the one embodying the very aim of every section of the society and the truth of society itself as its *raison d’être* (true knowledge and true speech) – similarly *moksha* has been interpreted by some as the cardinal *purushartha*, in the continuity yet beyond and outside the three others.

Both meanings seem to be radically opposed, the first one echoing an agonistic model of society, the second one an inclusive model. I will illustrate both meanings with four examples (respectively Mohandas Naimisharay’s ‘historical’ novel *Virânganâ Jhalkârî Bâi* and Ritwick Ghatak’s last movie *vs* Jainendra Kumar’s *Resignation (Tyag patr)*, and K.B. Vaid’s *There is no other (Dusra na koi)*, and attempt to show that the opposition may not be so radical.

**HINDU GODDES OR MUSLIM PERI – A HEROINE OF Ph.RENU’S “TIISRII KASAM ARTHAAT MAARE GAYE GULFAAM” (STORY AND FILM)**

**Dr. Guzel Strelkova**

**Institute of Asian and African Countries, Moscow State University**  
**Moscow, Russia**

The paper is based on a story written by prominent Hindi writer Phanishvarnath Renu “The Third Vow or Killed Gulfam” and its screen version. The main heroine, Hirabai, - an actress of Nautanki Theater – is perceived from different points of view (by the narrator and the story’s main and second plan heroes). The aim of the paper is to discuss to which extend religious, cultural, literary and commonplace perceptions of the one and the same object may differ, how religion and myth can construct perception and description of the heroine, how it is performed in the story and the film. The both – the story and the film - show interaction and interference on the “border” between “right and

wrong”, “good or bad”, “legal and illegal”, “equal or subaltern”. As a result, the heroine and the hero act and balance on the margins.

“Tiisri kasam arhaat maare gaye Gulfaam” is considered to be the classics of contemporary Hindi literature. It deals with a popular in *dastan* poetics motif of a love between an earthy prince and a fairy which was used in the first Urdu play “Indra Sabha” (1853) and presented the so called “Hindu-Muslim synthesis”. P. Renu brilliantly applied this motif and at the same time he used Hindu religion and myth. It helped to the writer to create a plot, characterize the heroine, transmit international folklore and literary tradition and reach some other tasks (including ideological ones).

The main attention of the paper will be paid to the margins on which the heroes of the story coexist (mainly in the world of Hindu and Muslim religions and culture, rural and urban style of life). Finally the hero takes a vow, meaning that he avoids marginality and continues to belong to his own social, religious and cultural strata. The heroine also does not change her usual way of life. But a few days they spent together changed their life. In this way the story and the film confirmed that a margin is as much important as a norm and it is necessary to discuss and consider them both – and try to realize their cross influence.

### **Dharma, the Dharmik, and the Religious Other in Hindi Popular Cinema: Exegeting Films as Religio-Cultural Texts**

**Kerry PC San Chirico**

**University of California-Santa Barbara**

**Santa Barbara, California, USA**

Whether it to be the samajik (“social”/popular) film or the specifically dharmic (religious) film, the connection between religion and film has been significant since the birth of Indian popular cinema in the early 1900s. The popular film, in particular, has always born the marks of dharma either in content or form. While the genre is never referred to as the “Hindu social,” a Hindu worldview is in fact presented. At the same time, it is no coincidence that the dominant ideology of the social/popular genre has long mirrored the dominant ideology of the nation-state. Thus, Indian popular film, including the Hindi variant known since the 1990s as Bollywood, provides the exegete a religio-cultural text of modern, mostly middle-class India, exhibiting ideological and sectarian tensions, imaginaries, hopes, and nightmares (in the form of *bhoots*, *prets*, and Pakistanis). What, then, do recent films tell us about the role of the religious other in the contemporary Indian imaginary? This paper examines the role of dharma and the dharmik in Hindi popular film before demonstrating the deep ambivalence present in filmic representations of India’s religious minorities. The paper is happily accompanied by Hindi film clips to be translated by the author. These films include *Guide* (1965), *Imtihaan* (1974) *Amara*, *Akbar*, *Anthony* (1977), *Fanaa* (2006), and *Kurbaan* (2009).

## **Religion and ‘Otherness’ in Bollywood Film**

**Dr. Diana Dimitrova**

**Michigan State University**

**East Lansing, Michigan, USA**

This paper will explore the representation of the notion of ‘otherness’ in Bollywood film. I will focus on the interpretation of the West and of the religious ‘other’ in film as well as on issues of diaspora and globalization. Some of the most recent Bollywood films that I will discuss are: *Lagan (The Rent on Land)*, *Dil cahta hai (The Heart Wants)*, and *Ham Dil De Cuke sanam (I Have Already Given My Heart Away)*, *Dilwale Dulhane Le Jayenge (The Bridegroom will Take away the Bride)* and *Kuch kuch hota hai (Something Happens)*. It is characteristic of the films that they deal with aspects of modernity, westernization and globalization in order to assert nationalistic Hindu identity that is different, “other,” and often traditional and conservative. The paper will examine the ideological implications of the representation of religion and ‘otherness’ and will also address questions of orientalism, diaspora and globalization.

## **Imagining the Powerful ‘Other’: Representations of Razia Sultan**

**Dr. Urvi Mukhopadhyay,**

**West Bengal State University,**

**West Bengal, India**

Razia bin Iltutmish (1236-40 AD) was perhaps the first woman in the Islamic world who exercised her political power from not behind the scenes, but actually as a ruler. Though the medieval sources have scarcely referred to this unusual phenomenon, an interest about this atypical ruler is quite rampant in the Orientalist writings since days of the colonial period. Romantic tales about Razia and her ‘fatal’ relationship with her ‘black’ ‘slave’ became a staple for historical romances as early as in 1836 where the focus was on ‘tragic’ tales of medieval lives under the oppressive conditions of ‘despotic’ governance and ‘bizarre customs’. The image of Razia became more intriguing as it could generate the seductive attraction of the oriental pleasures by portraying a woman at the centre of the courtly intrigues. This imagery drew a striking resemblance with widely portrayed image of another oriental female ruler Cleopatra, whose representation became the reservoir of polemical ‘other’ of the occidental male self in popular literature and films. The feminine image of Razia, however, stirred a more complex emotion during the nationalist movement, when the woman with power to rise against the ‘demonic’ rule of the foreign power was evoked to uphold the nationalist self-esteem. At least three versions of Razia’s reign were made on screen during three different historical periods: 1924, 1961 and 1983 respectively.

This paper would like to trace the popular representations of Razia, especially on screen by which the politics of representation of the controversial stereotypes such as ‘oriental despot’, ‘female ruler’ and ‘Islamic woman’ could be re-invoked. The focus will be on three different films made on Razia named *Razia Begum (1924)*, *Razia Sultan (1961)* and

*Razia Sultan* (1983) which will hopefully reveal the complex relationship between history and popular imaginations that changed along with time

**Remembering Bhangashvana: Towards an Inclusive, Fluid Construction of Gender and Sexual Identities as the Basis for Representation in Commercial Hindi Cinema**

**Sunny Singh**

**London Metropolitan University**

**London, UK**

In the Mahabharata, Bhisma explains to the Pandavas that only Bhangashvana would know whether men or women experience greater sexual pleasure as he alone of all humans had lived as both a man and a woman. The story is not alone in Indic classical texts which abound in gender and sexual fluidities. Indeed, one may argue that gender roles and archetypes, and the part they play in sexual identity and desire is not the binary formulation of the Semitic traditions, but rather based on a spectrum of gender and sexual identities that may simultaneously inhabit multiple socio-cultural spaces and assert multiple and fluid manifestations.

This paper examines the ways gender and sexuality are constructed in popular Hindi cinema as part of a ‘fluidity spectrum,’ creating images that traverse limiting ideals of masculinity and femininity and provide spaces for assertion of sexual identities that need not fit into limiting/limited socio-psychological constructs. The paper considers a range of films of the past forty years, including *Rafoo Chakkar* (1975), *Razia Sultan* (1983), *Daayra* (1996), *Shabnam Mausi* (2005), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) and *Dil Bole Hadippa* (2009), exploring not only films that foreground issues of gender and sexuality but also those that seem to treat non-heteronormative desires in subversive, diverse and inclusive ways.

As part of this analysis, this paper attempts to argue that perhaps new theoretical formulations of sexual and gender identities are needed for cinema and literature in India that go beyond constructions of “queerness” and/or “camp” in order to provide a more culturally-relevant explanation of gender and sexuality that are based on fluidity and inclusiveness, rather than binary exclusions.