Report on the 26th Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions

The 26th Spalding Symposium on Indians Religions was held March 30-April 1, 2001, at Regent’s Park College, Oxford in bright Spring sunshine. The Symposium attracted a large group of participants attracted by the prospect of excellent papers. Professor Diana Eck of Harvard University was our guest speaker.

The Convenor welcomed all participants to the Symposium. She commented that as the Symposium had moved to a new venue, Regent’s Park College, it was appropriate to remind ourselves of its history. The Symposium had been founded by Professor Karel Werner and ably carried forward by Dr Peter Connolly with the generous funding of the Spalding Trust. It had become a supportive and friendly annual meeting where papers were given by both established academics and younger researchers.

Dr Julius Lipner opened the Symposium on Friday afternoon with a paper entitled Bankim’s Anandamath and Bande Mataram: A Prelude to Hindutva? He observed that Bankim in Anandamath constructs key Hindu symbols which sacralise the whole of Bengal and by extension India. It legitimates armed insurrection. Today Bande Mataram has for some taken on a sinister character and is linked to a nationalist movement, epitomising defiance and hope. It has literary, historical and nationalist dimensions. In 1937 the Muslim League denounced the song as subversive. However, it never occurred to Gandhi that it was sectarian. In 1998 Kalyan Singh made Sarasvati Vandana and Bande Mataram compulsory in government schools. Muslims were angry because they perceived Bande Mataram as a hymn to the Goddess. Prime Minister Vajpayee maintained there was no need to impose Bande Mataram as it is repeated in the Lok Sabha as well as elsewhere. Dr Lipner also noted that Christians do not seem to have interpreted Bande Mataram as a prayer.

Dr Lipner said that Anandamatha appeared first in serial form and that his preferred translation is ‘Blessed Brotherhood’ (a translation later questioned). He gave an outline of its context in lower Bengal and its political setting and explored how far Bankim endorsed anti-Muslim sentiment. He noted that there were very few English translations of the work and that one translator claimed a morbid dislike of Muslims in the novel. Dr Lipner himself wondered whether Bankim had used Muslims as a front to attack the British and suggested that the antipathy to Muslims was the antipathy of deep disappointment and desperation. Muslims had let India down badly. They had integrated with Hindus but had failed to develop a close family relationship. The British were less India friendly but they had useful things to offer. They must bring in the knowledge of outward things so that the people would understand the inner.

Dr Lipner finished by considering whether Anandamatha and Bande Mataram were indeed a prelude to Hindutva. Bande Mataram can be understood both as a hymn and as a nationalist chant. Hindutva used in this way can be seen as homogenising Muslims or as seeking to encourage them to have outreach and engage in a culture of dialogue.

Professor Diana Eck in her introduction to her paper Sacred Geogrophy, Pilgrimage and the Land of India said that for some years, really since the publication of Benaras, City of Light, she had been working on a complex project on the sacred geography of India, studying the tirtha that have become powerpoints in a Hindu view of the land of India. She had been especially interested in groups, clusters, ‘networks’ of tirthas that by their ritual and
imaginative linking cast a landscape of mythic origins and ritual enactment in pilgrimage and yatra in its widest sense. This is the land of Bharat, a fact that has lent a ready made credence to the use of Hindu nationalism in the twentieth century. Professor Eck in her paper focused on three ways in which the sacred features of a landscape are established, three distinctive ways in which divine pressure creates a landscape. The first way is through dismemberment. The body of the Divine, the Devi, was distributed throughout the land by the dismemberment of the goddess Sati, evoking the ancient language of the body-cosmos as symbolised by the yajna. The second is through descent. The Divine descends from heaven to earth – for example in the rivers of India. The third way is that of eruption. The Divine erupts from the earth, appearing spontaneously, for example in the most brilliant eruptions of all, the jyotirlingas of Siva. All these are ways of speaking of divine presence in the land which begin to constitute a complex and imagined landscape.

In India, the inscribing of the land with the prolixity of Hindu myth is so vast and complex that it composed a radically locative worldview. The profusion of divine manifestation is played in multiple keys as the natural counterpart of divine infinity, incapable of being limited to any name or form, and therefore expressible only through multiplication and plurality. The land-god homologies create a multitude of imagined landscapes, lived-in maps, among the many peoples who might speak of themselves as Hindus, but they have in common an imaged landscape constituted by such land-god homologies whatever they may be in personal, local, regional and national terms. The challenges of diaspora have loosened the locativity as Hindu communities reconstitute and negotiate new identities in new lands. And yet to some extent, the experience of reconstituting Hindu communities in the West has created yet a further duplication of the patterns of sanctification found in India.

Professor Eck concluded by saying that the imagined landscape may coincide with the kind of imagined community Benedict Anderson speaks of as a ‘nation’, or it may not. Many of the tensions described as ‘communal’ in modern India arise from the challenges of bringing into being the imagined community of a multireligious, secular nation state in the context of multiple, though overlapping imagined landscapes. Even as the mind’s eye circles India, people of multiple communities will imagine different, but overlapping landscapes. They will be evocative in very different ways to those of the North and South, to Hindus, Muslims, and secular environmentalists. Her paper had attempted to illuminate some of the particular ways in which it is evocative for Hindus because of the elaborate patterns of inscribing myth on earth.

Professor Ian Reader (Lancaster) began the day on Saturday with a paper entitled Making Pilgrimages: Landscape, Symbols and Footsteps in the Emotional Terrain of the Shikoku Pilgrimage in Japan. He discussed the nature and structure of the Shikoku henro, a pilgrimage route around Shikoku, the fourth largest island of Japan, that takes the pilgrim to 88 Buddhist temples in a circuit of some 900 miles. The pilgrimage route (which centres on the holy Japanese Buddhist figure Kobo Daishi) passes through the island's four prefectures, encompassing and encircling its geographical features, from its coast and mountainous interior, to its main population centres. Symbolically the route takes the pilgrim on a journey redolent with images of enlightenment and death, and in the footsteps of the holy figure Kobo Daishi. Numerous legends, pilgrims' experiences and miracle tales further emphasise this image of Shikoku as a sacred realm.

Professor Reader discussed the formation and structure of the pilgrimage, with a focus both on its symbolic structures and on the importance of the island's geography and landscape in the construction and creation of the route. He examined how concepts of sacred geography
that are derived from the association between the landscape of Shikoku and the religious
travels of its focal figure Kobo Daishi are reinforced by legends and miracle tales that infuse
the landscape with a sense of the sacred, and drew on contemporary pilgrim experiences and
miracle tales to illustrate these points. He showed how the Shikoku pilgrimage has been 'made' or constructed through a combination of legends, symbolic structures, and
geographical features, and how the island of Shikoku has therefore become transformed into
an 'emotional landscape' full of sacred imagery.

Dr Lynn Foulston whose book on local goddesses is about to be published gave a fascinating
paper on Dancing with the Goddess: Worship of the Divine Feminine in Local Hinduism.
Dancing with the Goddess was a slide presentation that, through words and pictures,
examined the rich variety of local goddesses and their worship. It commenced by contrasting
Brahmanical temples and goddesses with those found in a local setting and proceeded by an
introduction to two contrasting local sites – Khurdapur a village settlement in Orissa and
Cholavandan a small town in Tamilnadu. Through her presentation Dr Foulston critiqued the
prevailing view that local goddesses are malevolent.

The bias and negativity of early scholarship and the goddess’s associations with disease were
explored in both Khurdapur and Cholavandan. However, Dr Foulston’s evidence at both
settlements suggests that local goddesses have been misunderstood. Although they are
closely associated with disease and embodying the power to inflict it, their curative powers are
most apparent. This evidence was explored by the examination of Santoshi Ma, the most
popular goddess in Khurdapur. Santoshi Ma’s worship here revolves around her possession
of a local woman, through which she performs acts of healing.

Dr Foulston said that in both settlements, the protective powers of the goddesses are more
overt. Visually and on examining their character, local goddesses can be viewed as complex
creatures. Fierce goddesses sometimes look benign while some peaceful, married goddesses
accept animal sacrifices. Another factor that complicates the issue is the power the devotees
have to change and manipulate the character of local goddesses. Dr Foulston showed how
the original fierce form of a south Indian goddess is weekly transformed, by decoration, into
an iconographically benign goddess. The presentation concluded with visual evidence of the
damage caused by a cyclone in 1999 on the settlement in Orissa and the state government’s
subsequent installation of an ornate temple to Shiva rather than the goddess.

Dr Kathleen Taylor’s paper Arthur Avalon among the Orientalists: Sir John Woodroffe and
Tantra was a tour de force of detective work on a fascinating figure, and a book Sir John
Woodroffe, Tantra and Bengal: 'an Indian soul in a European body', Curzon Press, is about
to be published. Dr Taylor commented that from the second decade of the 20th century,
Arthur Avalon’s books on tantrism started to revolutionize attitudes towards this previously
despised strand of Hindu and Buddhist religion. His influence depended to a large extent on
the fact that he was viewed as European orientalist who had exceptional knowledge of tantric
textual sources, a previously unexplored area for western ‘knowledge’. As a member of the
orientalist community, Arthur Avalon could challenge orientalist attitudes from within. It
was well known that this name was a pseudonym, but the supposed ‘real’ identity of the
pseudonymous scholar was also well known: Sir John Woodroffe, High Court judge at
Calcutta and a prominent figure in the cultural life of that city. In fact, as the paper shows,
the name Arthur Avalon was not so much a pseudonym as a legal fiction: taken not to
conceal the identity of Woodroffe but to enable him to claim authorship of works, or parts of
works, which were not his own. The real person who wanted his identity kept secret was
Woodroffe’s Bengali friend Atal Bihari Ghose. Ghose was the source of most of the textual knowledge which made Arthur Avalon an influential ‘orientalist’ scholar.

The paper focussed on Woodroffe himself, however, and the role he played out in public life as the pseudonymous Arthur Avalon. His supposed expertise in the tantras lay behind his popularity as a British supporter of Indian nationalism in the cultural sphere and in particular a very popular book which he wrote in support of Hindu tradition which aroused controversy with the British authorities. Dr Taylor said that in this as in other spheres, however, Woodroffe was full of what seem like contradictions to us today, which emerge when one compares his words with some of his actions. Woodroffe seems at times to have led what seems like a double life: on the one hand the orientalist scholar studying hindu tradition ‘impartially’; on the other a secret initiate (probably) of a tantric guru. Her paper attempted to bring all these strands together to present as rounded a picture of Woodroffe as possible from the present sources available.

On Saturday evening Dr Richard Shaw’s paper Iconography of ascetic images in the Vijayanagara empire gave us access to detailed and rich field research. Dr Shaw began by noting the tolerant religious policy of the Vijayanagara empire in which numerous ascetic sects flourished. He then described three important sites with ascetic images, Sringeri, Hampi-Vijayanagara, and Srisailam. He argued that the predominant group of ascetic images are the Siddhas, a Saivite sectarian sect which sought immortality through erotic-mysticism, alchemy, and hathayoga. Of these hathayoga was pre-eminent and the Siddhas have developed and propagated yoga from the medieval period to the present day.

The iconography and symbolism of Siddhas seated on fish and tigers was carefully examined and other vahanas were explored together with an alchemical image, dancing Siddhas and the iconographical elements of Siddha hair, dress and equipment. The paper was carefully and beautifully illustrated throughout with slides of temples, photographs and line drawings of a great variety of ascetic images.

Lance Cousins on Sunday, 1 April, began his paper Frauwallner and the early canonical Abhidhamma with some general remarks on the early abhidhamma literature. He went on to discuss the part played in European abhidhamma studies by the researches of Erich Frauwallner whose work was published from 1963-1973. Lance described Frauwallner’s chronological and compositional analysis of the Dhammasangani and drew attention to some important aspects of the Rupa-kanda in particular which had gone unnoticed by Frauwallner and Barceu. Frauwallner’s analysis of the Vibhanga and his conclusions as to its historical development were then examined. Frauwallner believed the earliest portions of that work to be the suttanta-bhajaniya sections at the start of most vibhangas (chapters). Lance offered the opposite possibility that it is the subsequent abhidhamma-bhajaniya sections which represent the original core.

Lance then considered whether there is an original three or four part Abhidhamma-pitaka and explained the process by which the Pali Abhidhamma works could have taken their current form. He put forward an alternative hypothesis that the World sets of the present Vibhanga may have originally had a panhapucchaka and no suttanta-bhajaniya, while the converse may be true for Awakening sets. He next looked at Frauwallner’s two (differing) statements on the chronology of the earlier Pali abhidhamma literature and argued for a date no later than the first century BCE. Some issues connected with the notion of the matika, understood as originally meaning a mnemonic keyword or heading, were also examined.
Lance then set the work of Frauwallner in context with the earlier (and seminal) work of Barceau and the parallel (?) work of Warder and others. He analysed subsequent European scholarship, mainly the additional proposals put forward by Warder in 1982 and the suggestions of Rupert Gethin. In conclusion Lance reconsidered in the light of this analysis the thesis put forward by Frauwallner and A.K. Warder that we should see the origin of the abhidharmma literature in the development of mnemonic lists of topics (matika/matrka).

Dr Nick Allen’s paper entitled Back in Rajagrha: Indo-European Comparativism and the Buddha’s Biography was the final paper of the Symposium. Dr Allen has argued in recent research papers that considerable parts of the narrative of the Mahabharata and the Odyssey go back to a common origin, probably proto-Indo-European. In this paper he proposed that the biography of the Buddha, as recounted in the earliest sources (Sutras and Vinaydas), is largely based on the same ancient heroic tradition. He carried the second argument further by examining the events that take place in Rajagriha when the Buddha revisits the city fairly soon after attaining Enlightenment, and after converting Kashyapa. He compared this body of textual material (as presented by Andre Barceau) and the story that is told in the second half of the Odyssey.

Dr Allen’s main focus was on the conversion of the two religious seekers Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, who he compared with the Greek Eumaeus and Philoctus. The two seekers transfer their loyalty from Sanjaya to the Buddha, much as the two stockmen, who at first supply the suitors with meat for their feasting, later transfer their affiliation and become members of the small band who help Odysseus in the massacre of the suitors. Dr Allen argued that the Buddhist story is naturally differently oriented – relative to the Greek story one could think of it as ‘spiritualised’. Nevertheless, the number of matching details and the precision of the matching are sufficient, he suggested, to confirm a genetic link between the two narrative traditions.

This was the first time that the Symposium had been held at Regent’s Park College owing to the closure of the Cherwell Centre. The hospitality arrangements were excellent. The 2002 Spalding Symposium will be held at Regent’s Park College from March 22-24. All are welcome.

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Convenor
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