

# Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions

13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> April 2018

Hatfield College,  
University of Durham

[spaldingsymposium.org](http://spaldingsymposium.org)

## Schedule

### Friday 13<sup>th</sup> April

- 1.30pm Introduction and welcome
- 1.45-3.00pm Opening keynote: Kunal Chakrabarti (Professor, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU)- ‘Laksmi’s Other: Brahmanical Construction of a Negative Goddess’
- 3.00-3.30pm Tea and coffee
- 3.30-4.30pm Elizabeth M. Rohlman (University of Calgary) - ‘Regions and Regionality in the *Mahāpurāṇas*: The Literary Cultures and Religious Communities of Western India in the *Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa*’
- 4.30-5.30pm Marzenna Jakubczak (Pedagogical University of Cracow) - ‘Non-theistic devotion in the classical and neo-classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga’
- 5.30-7.00pm Dinner at Lebeneat Restaurant
- 7.00-8.00pm Brian Black (Lancaster University) and Naomi Appleton (University of Edinburgh) – ‘Teaching Indian Religions in Schools’

### Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> April

- 9.00-10.00am Christopher V. Jones (University of Oxford) - ‘Mystery and Secrecy in the Mahāyāna: A Shared Theme in the ‘*Lotus*’ and ‘*Nirvāṇa*’ Sūtras’
- 10.00-11.00am Natalie Gummer (Beloit College, Wisconsin) - ‘Reassessing *Rasa*: Sūtras, Sovereignty, and the Ritual Substance of Speech’
- 11.00-11.30am Tea and coffee
- 11.30-1.00pm Postgraduate papers  
Sophie Barker (Lancaster University) - “‘Why Would I Want to Get Married?’ Negotiating Permission for Renunciation in the *Therīgāthā*’  
Sayori Ghoshal (Columbia University NY) - ‘Locating Race in the Question of Religion in modern India’  
Güzin A. Yener (University of Oxford) - ‘Practices of Kurukullā: Feminine Wisdom of Love, Power and Magic in Tibetan Buddhism’

1.00-3.00pm Lunch and then free time to explore the city

3.00-4.00pm Postgraduate papers

Durga Kale (University of Calgary) - 'Whole Cosmos in Her Bosom: The Making of a Multifarious Deity in Coastal Maharashtra'

Zuzana Špicová (Charles University, Prague) - "'He Never Touched the Ground": Bhīṣma's Two Falls'

4.00-4.30pm Tea and coffee

4.30-5.30pm Elizabeth Cecil (Leiden University) and Laxshmi Greaves

(Independent Researcher, Cardiff) - 'Adorning the Lord with Garlands: *Liṅga* Worship as Lived Religion in the Images of Early North India'

5.30-6.30pm Durham roundtable discussion featuring:

Rachel Barclay (Curator, Oriental Museum)

Robin Coningham (UNESCO Professor, Archaeology)

Yulia Egorova (Reader, Anthropology)

Jonathan Miles-Watson (Associate Professor, Theology and Religion)

Tanju Sen (Community Engagement Officer, Oriental Museum)

7.00pm Dinner at Claypath deli then evening of socialising

### **Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> April**

9.00-10.00am Mikel Burley (University of Leeds) - 'Dance of the Deodhās: Divine Possession, Blood Sacrifice and the Grotesque Body in Assamese Goddess Worship'

10.00-11.00am Garima Kaushik (Nalanda University) - 'Socio-economic imperatives in the emergence of the Sapta Matrikas Iconography'

11.00-11.30am Tea and coffee

11.30-12.45 Closing keynote: Eleanor Nesbitt (Professor Emerita, University of Warwick) - 'Idolatry and ethnography: reflections on two centuries of western women's writing about Sikhs'

12.45-1.00pm Closing remarks

1.00-2.00pm Lunch and then departure

## Abstracts (in order of programme)

### **Kunal Chakrabarti (JNU)- ‘Laksmi’s Other: Brahmanical Construction of a Negative Goddess’**

*Abstract tbc*

### **Elizabeth M. Rohlman (University of Calgary) - ‘Regions and Regionality in the Mahāpurāṇas: The Literary Cultures and Religious Communities of Western India in the Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa’**

Kunal Chakrabarti has written of the *upapurāṇas* that they “are so overwhelmingly regional in their concerns, catering as they did to local requirements, that they can be identified with a particular locale with a fair degree of certainty” (Chakrabarti, 2001). This paper considers the question of what would happen if we were to expand this association of region and text to the *mahapurāṇas*, and most specifically, to the *Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa*. This is not an entirely novel approach. Indeed, Frederick Pargiter, in the preface to his 1903 translation of the *Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa*, largely sidestepped the debate about *purāṇas* that his predecessors were engaged in regarding whether they were primarily of historical or religious value. Instead, Pargiter focused overwhelmingly on the geographical data of the text, and argued that the *Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa* could be precisely located as a product of Western India, and was composed at a *tīrtha* on the banks of the the River Narmada (Pargiter 1903). Departing from Pargiter, I argue that the regionality embedded in the *Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa* is inextricably linked to religious concerns. From the religiously imbued landscape of the text’s narrative to the very name of the text—the *Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa* being unique among *mahapurāṇas* in that it is named for its narrator, rather than its subject—the *Markāṇḍeya* conveys a very specific sense of place and of the religious communities and literary cultures that inhabit that place. This paper examines the textual evidence for Pargiter’s claims of the *Markāṇḍeya*, and examines what conventions of regional literary culture and sectarian religious sentiments can be gleaned from this evidence. It concludes by considering the ways in which this regional identity might re-frame the *Markāṇḍeya*’s inter-textual interlocutors—most famously the Mahabharata, but also countless later, regional *purāṇas* and *mahātmyas* of Western India that are engaged in intertextual dialogue with the *Markāṇḍeya Purāṇa*.

### **Marzenna Jakubczak (Pedagogical University of Cracow) - ‘Non-theistic devotion in the classical and neo-classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga’**

The paper starts with some textual distinctions concerning the concept of God in the metaphysical framework of two classical schools of Hindu philosophy, Sāṃkhya and Yoga. The author focuses on the functional and pedagogical aspects of prayer as well

as practical justification of “religious meditation” in both philosophical schools. Special attention is given to the practice called *īśvarapraṇidhāna*, recommended in the Yoga school, which is interpreted by the author as a form of non-theistic devotion. Devotion is viewed here as not just compatible with knowledge but also strongly interrelated with it and indispensable on the path of spiritual development. That is why the author offers a brief review of the understanding of ‘discriminating knowledge’ (*vivekakhyaṭi*) and ‘devotion’ (*bhakti*), or ‘meditation on God’ (*īśvarapraṇidhāna*), in the oldest preserved texts of the classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga schools. The second part of the paper takes a closer look at the Kapila Maṭha āsram established in 1927 in Bihar—a modern phenomenon recognized as attempt to revive the ancient ṛṣi Kapila’s lineage. Here, Kapila Maṭha, labelled as the neo-classical phase of Sāṃkhya-Yoga, is to be an excellent example of the conjunction of both cognitive and pious Dharmic aspirations which go beyond the narrow categories of philosophy and religion coined in the Western intellectual thought. The meaning of the central object of this concentration, that is *puruṣa-viśeṣa*, is then considered in detail. The subject matter is discussed in the wider context of yogic self-discipline that enables a practitioner to overcome ignorance (*avidyā*) and the narrowness of egotic perspective (*asmitā*), recognized in the Hindu darśanas as the root-cause of all suffering or never-fulfilled-satisfaction (*duḥkha*). The non-theistic devotion and spiritual pragmatism assumed by the adherents of Sāṃkhya-Yoga redefines the concept of “God” (*īśvara*) as primarily an object of meditative practice and a special tool convenient for spiritual pedagogy.

**Christopher V. Jones (University of Oxford) - ‘Mystery and Secrecy in the Mahāyāna: A Shared Theme in the ‘Lotus’ and ‘Nirvāṇa’ Sūtras’**

Among the most influential and well-known works of Indian Mahāyānist literature is the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*-, or *Lotus Sūtra*. Ideas central to it – foremost the Buddha’s revelation of there being only a single vehicle (*ekayāna*), and hence only the liberation that is attained to a Buddha – were profoundly influential, and in the eyes of its authors constituted a paradigm shift in how the Buddhist *dharma* should be understood. Another important *sūtra* that mentions the *Lotus* by name is the *Mahāyāna- Mahāparinirvāṇamahāsūtra*, or sometimes simply *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. This text also presents itself as overhauling what the Buddhist community knew of the *dharma*: declaring that the Buddha exists permanently beyond his apparent death, and moreover (via a form of Buddha-nature teaching) that sentient beings possess something that can be called their enduring self (*ātman*).

Both the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras* recognize their content to be challenging and certainly, in doctrinal terms, revolutionary. Both also confront the accusation that – if what they recount is true – the Buddha must not have been entirely honest

in earlier articulations of the *dharma*. Finally, they also both gloss the revelations that he makes using the unusual expressions *saṃdhābhāṣya* or *sandhāvācāna*. Though Chinese and Tibetan translators of these expressions understood them to have nuances of ‘allusion’ or ‘secrecy’, such translations do not do justice to the manner in which these texts understand the Buddha to have used ‘*saṃdhā*-speech’. While the *Lotus Sūtra* may not provide much information on how we should interpret (let alone translate) ‘*saṃdhā*-speech’, details and similes found in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, which have received less scholarly attention, may point us in the right direction. This paper looks at the ways in which both these texts employed this uncommon language, and how it relates to the shared, central theme of the Buddha saying things beyond the expectations and comprehension of his audience. I will argue that in both texts the Buddha is understood to be revealing mysteries that are at the heart of his *saddharma*: a notion that may not have sat well with early audiences, but became important for later Buddhist authors who wished to justify further innovations within Indian Mahāyāna tradition.

**Natalie Gummer (Beloit College, Wisconsin) - ‘Reassessing *Rasa*: Sūtras, Sovereignty, and the Ritual Substance of Speech’**

In this paper, I argue that the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and the *Suvarṇabhāṣottama*, taken together, suggest a crucial and illuminating link between Vedic rituals for conferring sovereignty and the emergence of courtly poetry (*praśasti*, *kāvya*) in the classical period. These sūtras portray their own recitation as a ritual that confers sovereignty— both worldly sovereignty and the ultimate sovereignty that is buddhahood. The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* “cooks” listeners, progressively transforming them until they become golden-bodied bodhisattvas and eventually buddhas who preside over their own fields. The *Suvarṇabhāṣottama* calls its own oral substance a *rasa*, a potent liquid essence that, like the liquid of unction in Vedic royal rituals, confers the qualities of sovereignty upon its listeners. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, these self-representations draw deeply upon sacrificial means and ends, whereby a sacrificer (paradigmatically, a king) gains an immortal, sovereign body that is identified with the Vedic verses uttered in the ritual. The sūtras are similarly both means and end, both the potent, performative speech that confers sovereignty and the perfect, immortal buddha-body gained thereby. In these ways, they participate in a broader trend in the late Vedic and post-Vedic period toward the verbalization of sacrificial ritual.

But the sūtras also share some significant features with the literary genres that begin to take shape at roughly the same time, in the early centuries of the common era. Like the sūtras, *kāvya* and *praśasti* are strongly associated with *rājya*, with kingly rule. And like the sūtras, these poetic forms constitute the king’s

immortal “glory body,” which allows his poetically invoked presence to live on after the dissolution of his mortal body. Most strikingly, both the sūtras and poetic literature are characterized by the intense affective power, the *rasa*, of their eloquent recitation. Taken together, these correspondences suggest that the sūtras should be read as consecratory rituals the efficacy of which is located in their capacity to generate powerful and transformative aesthetic experiences. Perhaps more controversially, they suggest that the same may be true of the early manifestations of *kāvya* and *praśasti*.

### **Sophie Barker (Lancaster University) - “Why Would I Want to Get Married?”**

#### ***Negotiating Permission for Renunciation in the Therīgāthā***

Being a woman does not prevent a Buddhist from attaining *nibbāna* but it does present a set of unique challenges that are represented variously by the Buddhist women of the *Therīgāthā*. This paper will focus on one such challenge, where a woman is depicted as requiring the permission of her male guardian in order to renounce. For the purpose of this piece Sumedhā’s eloquent plea and negotiation with her mother, father, and promised husband will form the main focus (Thig 451-525). Through this discussion I will draw attention to: the way dialogue is used to ‘justify and promote’ the renunciation of a female character; Sumedhā’s illustration and exposition of the Dhamma through a female lens; and, crucially, the similarities between this dialogue and those that scholars such as Jonathan Geen have explored in both Brāhmanical and Jain sources.

This paper will form part of a broader interrogation into the significance of the female voice in the *Therīgāthā*, where I ultimately aim to address the question exclaimed by the bhikkhunī Somā in both the *Therīgāthā* and *Samyutta Nikāya*: ‘What does being a woman have to do with it?’ (Thig 61. & SN 1.5.2.523.). Somā is challenging Māra’s aggravating statement that ‘[it is] not possible for a woman, especially not one with only two fingers’ worth of wisdom’, to attain *nibbāna* (Thig 60. & SN 1.5.2.522.). Such explicit statements about a woman’s wisdom and potential for religious proficiency are common in early South Asian textual sources. While Māra is the only character in the Pāli Canon foolish enough to explicitly doubt a woman’s ability to attain *nibbāna*, these very ideas on womanhood are communicated implicitly in a number of suttas by the Buddha himself. In illustrating both their mastery of the Dhamma and arahant status, the female voices of the *Therīgāthā* consistently negate such ideas. In doing so, however, they are not only responding to the notoriously antagonistic Māra, who the tradition already accepts is ignorant, they are also responding to voices from both within and beyond their own tradition that are putting up obstacles for women and their religious aspirations. This paper will, thus, also begin to draw attention to the techniques employed by the authors of the

*Therīgāthā* to: establish the legitimate place of women at the heart of a Buddhist tradition otherwise dominated by male voices; and voice a female perspective on prevailing socio-religious depictions of women from both within and beyond the Buddhist tradition.

### **Sayori Ghoshal (Columbia University NY) - 'Locating Race in the Question of Religion in modern India'**

In 1966, the Anthropological Survey of India published a compilation of somatological data that had been collected in colonial India, beginning in 1868. Some of the groups studied were, Anglo-Indians, Muslims, Chinese of Calcutta, Buddhists, and Brahmins. Anthropometric data, that is physical stature, nasal index and facial index were documented. Significantly, all these groups were categorized under one of three headings: caste, tribe or community. Contrary to our common sense today, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists or Sikhs were not described as 'religious' groups. This paper explores the entangled relation between racial and religious difference in the discourse of the religious minority in late colonial India. In order to trace this, I focus on two facets of colonial knowledge: notions of race and physical features in the broader discipline of anthropometry, and their intersection with notions of religion and religious community. I use three texts in this regard, among others: an anthropological work by Herbert Hope Risley titled *The People of India* (1908), Upendra Nath Mukerji's work on the Hindus 'A Dying Race' (1909) and Brajendranath Seal's keynote address at the 'First Universal Races Congress' titled *Meaning of Race, Tribe, Nation* (1911). Risley was a colonial anthropologist and administrator who founded the discipline and practice of colonial anthropometry in the 1890s. He undertook large surveys for measuring physical features of native groups to infer relations between the body and racial profile, thus ranking these groups on a cultural, civilizational scale of hierarchy. Mukerji was a Hindu nationalist whose aim in the book was to posit the declining population of the 'weak' Hindus against the 'thriving' Muslims of India and was meant to serve as a call to Hindus for awareness and action. Although Muslims were clearly contrasted with Hindus, religion and race were conflated when differences of faith were coupled with differences in physical and bodily features. Seal was a member of the Hindu reformist group, Brahma Samaj in Bengal and worked on comparative religions. His keynote highlighted the importance of studying race relations as a science to address conflicts among groups in the British empire. Besides their overlap in career paths and personal friendships, these figures and their texts also demonstrate the intersection of notions of race, religion, and also caste. Drawing from these materials, this paper makes three arguments. First, Hindus, Muslims, Christians as unambiguously *religious* communities in India has a history – it was not always granted as such. Second, this paper demonstrates that the

constitution of certain groups as religious communities did not happen in isolation – that is, it not only involved the notion of religion but also incorporated notions of racial and caste differences. I conclude by arguing that it is important to examine this process because it reveals what forms of colonial, nationalist and racial knowledges inform the constitution of communities as ‘religious’ continuing up to the present – and particularly so, for the religious communities in India that are designated as minorities today.

**Güzin A. Yener (University of Oxford) - ‘Practices of Kurukullā: Feminine Wisdom of Love, Power and Magic in Tibetan Buddhism’**

Kurukullā (Skt. *kurukullā*, Tib. *ku ru ku lle* or *rig byed ma*) is a female meditational deity in Vajrayana Buddhism traditionally associated with subjugation, knowledge, love, desire, enchantment, overpowering, and what is popularly known as ‘magnetising’ in the West. As a female Buddha of Indian origin, her ritual practices –found in Kriya (Skt. *kriyātantra*, Tib. *bya rgyud*) and especially the Highest Yoga Tantra (Skt. *anuttarayoga* or *niruttarayoga*, Tib. *rnal ’byor bla na med pa’i rgyud*) classes– are widespread in all major Tibetan Buddhist schools. Despite her popularity and unique role in Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, a detailed academic study on Kurukullā practice in Tibetan Vajrayana tradition has not yet been published.

Popularly referred to as the ‘Female Buddha of Love’ due to her association with love and bewitchment through utilizing and transforming amorous desire in a tantric context. Kurukullā is the supreme deity of subjugation and enchantment in Tibetan Buddhism *par excellence*. The practice of subjugation (Skt. *vaśīkaraṇa*, Tib. *dbang*) is a form of tantric ritual which is categorised as one of the ‘Four Enlightened Actions’ (Tib. *phrin las nam bzhi*, Skt. *caturkarman*) together with the other activities of pacifying, enriching and destroying. This paper examines the emergence and role of Kurukullā in Tibetan Buddhist practice within the context of the meaning and usage of ‘subjugation’ and ‘The Four Enlightened Actions’ to contextualise her ritual practices, which skilfully merge the soteriological and apotropaic content.

This paper presents a detailed literature review, followed by an analysis of the iconography of Kurukullā’s main forms by using the main ritual (Skt. *sādhana*, Tib. *sgrub thabs*) texts found in the *Sādhanamālā* or ‘Garland of Practice’, the Hevajra Tantra (Skt. *Śrī Hevajra ḍākinī jala saṃvara mahā tantra raja* or *Śrī Hevajra mahā tantra raja*, Tib. *kye’i rdo rje zhes bya ba rgyud kyi rgyal po* or *kye rdo rje’i rgyud* or *kyai rdo rje rgyud*), and The Practice Manual of Noble Tārā Kurukullā (Skt. *Āryatārākurukullākālpa*, Tib. *’phags ma srgol ma ku ru kulle’i rtog pa*) together with a discussion of the variants of her name, her symbolism, and attributes. The paper also addresses Kurukullā’s close affiliation with Tārā by referencing primary texts mentioned above and other sources such as Tārā’s Basic Ritual Text (Skt. *Tārāmulakālpa*).

**Durga Kale (University of Calgary) - ‘Whole Cosmos in Her Bosom: The Making of a Multifarious Deity in Coastal Maharashtra’**

*Savnekarin* (lit. “belonging to Savne”), worshipped for the boons of fecundity in a region of Coastal Maharashtra in Western India, is embodied in the local oral histories as a heroine, and a multifarious and omniscient deity in the lap of Sahyadri hills. The origin as the ‘daughter of the mountains’ in this case aligns *Savnekarin* with the embodiment of Parvati. It almost appears that the narratives for this deity employ other known sources and caricatures as crutches to understand the deity dictating the scene of regional community religion. The deity is described as catering to the needs of all people in the society, especially the women, irrespective of their religious background; calling to mind the Marxist model of religions as competing products wherein *Savnekarin* seems to be fashioned to win over a large devotee sphere. The microcosm propounded by the deity accentuates her dynamic personality aligning her with a Sufi saint in the nearby village as her brother, as the guiding force for Parshurama in the form of Renuka when Konkan was created, and as the guardian deity of the hamlet of Savne (Ratnagiri district) in Coastal Maharashtra where she had laid down her life as a warrior. Employing McComas Taylor’s argument for the “true” narrative function of texts, the paper would seek to examine the boundaries of the true nature for the deity in local imagination and belief system. Hailed as a local heroine, virgin and the image of Puranic goddesses, *Savnekarin* is animated in the form of a crude volcanic rock piece, retaining her liminal character. The annual festivities in the honour of this deity further complicate her malleable character, featuring animal sacrifices and games with fire which draw connections to the malevolent aspect of worship and body practices extant in the Colonial and the Post-Colonial records. Taking all these aspects in view, the paper will situate the deity in the pantheon under worship in modern times. In addition, the navigation through the plethora of oral histories and local legends will chisel out *Savnekarin* as the centre of the sacred cosmos in a locality in Coastal Maharashtra. The case example of this deity under worship will help in the reconstruction of the religious synthesis in Coastal Maharashtra (“konkan”), comparing that with the scheme of religious appropriation in the mainland of Maharashtra (popularly termed as “desh”), since the medieval period in Indian history.

**Zuzana Špicová (Charles University, Prague) - “He Never Touched the Ground”:**

**Bhīṣma’s Two Falls’**

Bhīṣma’s falling to the bed of arrows and lying on it, is one of the most famous scenes from the *Mahābhārata*. After Bhīṣma falls from his chariot, he does not touch the ground, supported by arrows (6.114.81–99), and is provided with a pillow and water (*ambhas*) by Arjuna, also by means of arrows. This narrative has an earlier counterpart

in *Udyogaparvan*, where Bhīṣma also falls from his chariot during a battle against Rāma Jāmadagnya, and again, does not touch the ground because he is readily caught by eight mysterious twice-borns, who sprinkle water on him and comfort him. (5.183.10–18) In this paper, the two short narratives will be compared, especially with respect to the motif of not touching the ground, taking into account Bhīṣma's previous life as one (eighth) of the *Vasus*, or the principal *Vasu*, Dyaus. The compound *dyāvāpṛthivī* is often used in the *Vedas* for the universal parents, and Dyaus is generally mentioned in connection with Pṛthivī. Furthermore, Bhīṣma's former life is explicitly mentioned in the Rāma Jāmadagnya episode; but in both the aforementioned *Mahābhārata* episodes, not touching the ground is emphasized. The paper will deal with possible interpretations of Bhīṣma's not touching the ground as avoiding death, and also the sin of killing one's *guru* or pupil; as enhancing Bhīṣma's position between heaven and earth (*antarikṣe*), and between gods and men; and as a symbol of Bhīṣma's vow of celibacy, as compared to Dyaus's essential and highly procreative relationship with Pṛthivī.

**Elizabeth Cecil (Leiden University) and Laxshmi Greaves (Independent Researcher, Cardiff) - 'Adorning the Lord with Garlands: *Liṅga* Worship as Lived Religion in the Images of Early North India'**

This study aims to contribute a new perspective on the evolution of the religious practice of *liṅga* worship by tracing the development of a unique iconographic motif: the garlanded Śiva *liṅga*. In Śuṅga period Mathurā (1st century BCE), a distinctive trend emerged for relief sculptures depicting hosts of devotees, both human and divine, male and female, garlanding Śiva *liṅgas* in ritual ceremonies. This genre became increasingly popular in the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods, when new variations of imagery were developed, before being phased out after the fall of the Gupta Empire in the sixth-century CE. The emergence of garlanded Śaiva images developed first in Mathurā and soon spread to important ancient cities - including Raṅgamahal, Ahichhatrā, Śrāvastī, and Rajgir - positioned along the Uttarāpatha, a major conduit for trade and travel that extended across North India. By tracing the development of this definitive iconographic motif in these key locales, our study aims to contribute a new perspective on the earliest history of *liṅga* worship as a lived religious practice that spanned geographic boundaries and crossed social and gender hierarchies.

Ritual devotion to the *liṅga* became a defining feature of Śiva worship in ancient India, and remains so today; yet the historiography of the practice has relied on bodies of esoteric literature that reflect the perspectives of an elite of male authors. By contrast, this study approaches the sculptures as an unstudied archive that records a history of religion in practice. The corpus of images can be arranged into four types, all found in North India. These types include relief panels portraying

devotees garlanding the *liṅga*; relief or free-standing *liṅgas* and *mukhaliṅgas* carved with floral wreaths; semi-anthropomorphic images of Śiva emerging from the *liṅga* and wielding weapons with his lower hands while, remarkably, garlanding himself with his upper hands; and lastly, a fully anthropomorphic manifestation of a composite form of Śiva (possibly with Agni) holding a garland raised above his head.

This presentation will incorporate perspectives from the disciplines of art history, religious studies, archaeology, and philology, in order to situate this iconographic motif in its broader archeological and social contexts. In addition, one of the objectives of this paper will be to explore the theological implications and symbolic potential of the god's act of self-garlanding. It also remains to be understood why garlanded images were not incorporated into the formalised language of Śaiva iconography after the sixth-century CE. In addition to contextualizing the images and exploring their meanings, our study also brings this new material evidence to bear upon the textual sources—in particular sections of recently edited manuscripts of the *Śivadharmasāstra* (Rules for the Worship of Śiva). By integrating the study of textual and material sources, this paper will break new ground in the study of popular religious practice in a formative period of South Asian history.

**Mikel Burley (University of Leeds) - 'Dance of the Deodhās: Divine Possession, Blood Sacrifice and the Grotesque Body in Assamese Goddess Worship'**

'Possession' by deities or spirits has been a prevalent phenomenon in many religious and cultural milieus, not least those of South Asia. It has even been suggested that 'if anything is characteristic of popular religion in India it is possession' and '[i]t would be possible to read the history of religion in South Asia in terms of possession' (Flood 2006: 87). Yet this complex phenomenon has frequently been neglected by Indologists and marginalized by elite religious spokespeople. Also underexplored have been forms of goddess worship in north-eastern India, where Tantric Hinduism has been strongly influenced by non-Hindu indigenous traditions. This paper helps to fill these lacunae by providing a contextualized study of a particular festival that is celebrated annually at the temple of the goddess Kāmākhyā near Guwahati in Assam.

Taking place over three days in mid-August, the festival is referred to both as *Manasā Pūjā* ('worship of [the snake goddess] *Manasā*') and as the *Deodhanī* festival or dance. The meaning of the Assamese term *deodhanī* is disputed, but one purported derivation is from the Sanskrit *devadhvani*, meaning 'sound or echo of the deity' (Smith 2006: 140–1). Those who do the dancing are called *deodhās*, which term is again commonly rendered as 'sound/echo/voice of the deity'. Between sixteen and twenty-one in number, it is claimed of these 'shamanistic' male dancers that they are possessed by deities, including several of the fiercest goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. The festival incorporates animal sacrifice, which is a regular occurrence at

the Kāmākhyā temple, the principal sacrificial victims being pigeons and young male goats. At certain times during the festival the deodhās, in keeping with the macabre personas of the deities they are said to embody, ritually drink the blood of these animals.

In addition to Indological and ethnographic textual sources on Tantric Hinduism, spirit possession and the worship of female deities, research for the paper includes first-hand observations made during a fieldwork trip in August 2017. The paper's conceptual richness is enhanced by its invoking of motifs from theories of art and literature. Most notably, the notion of 'the grotesque' is utilized, as delineated especially by the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin in his well-known study of the writings and cultural milieu of François Rabelais. Just as Bakhtin highlights, for example, how 'the gaping mouth' and its act of devouring become focal points of literary depictions of the grotesque body (Bakhtin 1984: 317), so, in the Deodhanī festival, the devouring mouth – consuming flesh and blood – becomes central to the enactment of divine power. More generally the melding of horrific and ludicrous elements that is characteristic of the grotesque is echoed in the dark yet also pantomime-like imagery of the deodhās' dance.

The themes of pulsating rhythmic drumming (which establishes a ritual sound-world), the ritual transgression of Brahmanical purity norms and the performativity of divine possession receive special attention in this paper, which, by means of contextualized thick description contributes to a deepened understanding of goddess worship in Assamese religion.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Flood, Gavin. 2006. *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Smith, Frederick M. 2006. *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*. New York: Columbia University Press.

### **Garima Kaushik (Nalanda University) - 'Socio-economic imperatives in the emergence of the Sapta Matrikas Iconography'**

Sapta Matrikas better understood as the 'Seven Mothers' (Brahmani, Vaisnavi, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda) are the personification of the Shaktis of the Brahmanical deities. Though largely believed to be an integral part of the Shaiva and Shakti cult, the Matrikas occupy significant spaces within the Buddhist as well as the Jaina pantheon. The existing historiography devotes considerable space to the origin and iconographic study of Sapta Matrikas. The cult is traced back to the Rig Vedic Mother Goddess and numerous references in the Puranic texts (Varaha, Matsya and Markandeya) have been used to trace back her origin. This paper as the title suggests, is an appraisal of the existing socio-cultural, religious and economic imperatives that provided the impetus for the origin and

development of the concept of Sapta Matrikas. It analyses the existing epigraphic and archaeological data as opposed to the exiting text based analysis which in turn helps us rethink how the subject of gender and religion has thus far been dealt with. Rather than being studied as active, autonomous agents within the historical process, women have been treated as 'symbolic pawns in a complex ideological contest'. Their position as 'good' or 'dismal' had been portrayed almost totally based on selective reading of source material available, those being primarily the textual sources. Recently there has been a shift in focus towards other sources like epigraphy and archaeology. The use of epigraphic sources have brought into sharp focus thus far little known aspects of Buddhism. However, a lot of questions remain unanswered still. An exhaustive examination of inscriptional sources across religions would help find many of these answers. This would first require treatment of sources dealing with religion as interrelated, which would mean not looking into religions as sanitised spaces, which occur in a void, but as fluid, flexible and permeable spaces where a lot of religio- cultural osmosis was the norm rather than an aberration. The paper attempts to address some inter-religious issues from a gendered perspective. It underscores the role of women as active agents in the process that configured the early religious milieu. The study outlines the dynamics of this little discussed and scarcely understood other half of the religious community, within the different religious traditions and how their active presence and participation was a crucial factor in the creation of the concept of Sapta – Matrikas. While the study discusses on the one hand, the implication of the evolution of this concept on Brahmanism, on the other it examines how the heterodox religions reacted to this new pantheistic development within Brahmanism.

**Eleanor Nesbitt (University of Warwick) - 'Idolatry and ethnography: reflections on two centuries of western women's writing about Sikhs'**

Dorothy Field is the one woman whose writing appears in major anthologies of European writing on Sikhs and their religion. Although Field's 1914 monograph was the first substantial study of Sikhism by a western woman, between 1809 and 2012 many other women (excluding the scholars and converts from the late twentieth century onwards) have commented on Sikh history, religion and society and described their face to face encounters in India (and, more recently, in the UK). I will be introducing some of these diarists, letter-writers, novelists and royals and examining three of their recurrent themes: the 'transformation' of the religion of Baba Nanak by later Gurus; the matter of 'idolatry' and, connected with this, the relationship of Sikhs to 'Hinduism'. This involves considering the relevance of ethnography both to my interrogation of their output and to their reporting of their engagement with Sikhs.