

Shades of Violence: Aggression and Domination in Indian Culture

International conference

27-29 October 2022

Abstracts

Saturday, 29 October 2022

Keynote speaker: Chettiarthodi Rajendran, University of Calicut, India

Violence and death in Kerala's classical theatre: Texts and performances

This paper is an attempt to probe into the depiction of violence and death in classical Sanskrit drama, especially in its avatar as *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the performance related to the temple theatre of Kerala. Bruce M. Sullivan (2007) has already examined the issues related to the depiction of dying on the stage in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *kūṭiyāṭṭam* maintaining that despite the stereotyped perception of the Sanskrit theatre tradition of India as avoiding depiction of death on the stage, death was enacted on the stage, and has always been integral to the Sanskrit theatre tradition, as seen to the present day in Kerala's *kūṭiyāṭṭam* tradition. Largely agreeing with these findings, and in continuation with them, in the present paper, violence and death as the culmination of it are examined in the context of the semiotics in the depiction of terrible scenes in a drama, including costume, color scheme, tonal features and acting in its ramifications. The paper will first of all examine attitude of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the seminal text of Indian theatre, to the darker side of life and the issues related to the portrayal of violence and death in *kūṭiyāṭṭam*, the only living stage related to Sanskrit drama. The paper will also have an occasion to briefly touch upon other classical art forms like Kathakali which are based on epic and Purāṇic themes and which are noted for their prominent portrayal of violence on stage.

Cinzia Pieruccini, University of Milan, Italy

Vīrabhadra, the Dreadful Destroyer of Sacrifice. Representations in Plaques from South India

When Śiva is not invited to the great sacrifice of Dakṣa, his bride Satī's father, out of anger he emanates from himself the terrible Vīrabhadra, who with extreme violence totally destroys the sacrificial arena. This myth, narrated extensively in the Epics and especially in the Purāṇas, has remote origins in the myths concerning Rudra, the Vedic-Brahmanic precursor of Śiva. The cult of Vīrabhadra spread in South India during the Vijayanagara empire, in particular thanks to the Śivaite sect of the Vīraśaivas, and appears to have flourished also in the following centuries.

The popular diffusion of his cult is also testified by the wide production of metal plaques depicting this god. A conspicuous collection of these plaques was donated a few years ago by the art collectors Giuseppe and Paola Berger to the Veneranda Accademia Ambrosiana of Milan, and is presently on display in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. Here we propose a general analysis of this repertoire. These plaques are mostly attributable to the 18th and 19th centuries and their exact provenance cannot be defined, but they presumably come from southern Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and especially Karnataka. They show an almost constant iconography, but also different artistic languages, more cultured, popular or generically definable as tribal.

Chiara Policardi, University of Milan, Italy

The Goddess on the Lion: Animal Symbolism in the Representations of the Female Warrior Deity in Kuṣāṇa and Gupta India

This paper focuses on the genesis of the association of the Indian female warrior deity with the lion. As is well-known, this is a goddess of kaleidoscopic identity, who evokes at once imperial grandeur and village cultic practices.

This figure cannot be identified as the Hindu Mahiṣāsūramardīnī or Durgā in any Pre-Kuṣāṇa and Kuṣāṇa text or inscription, at least on the basis of the known evidence. A warrior goddess is depicted as sitting or standing on a lion on several Kuṣāṇa coins, being especially prevalent on the coinage of Kaniṣka (c. 127-153 CE) and Huveṣka (c. 153-191 CE). Such an image also seems to have been borrowed for some of the early Gupta coins. A female divine figure on a lion is represented also in some sculpted icons from the early centuries CE, found in different sites in the northern Indian subcontinent, among which of particular interest is the image retrieved from the Kuṣāṇa dynastic site at Māt, near Mathurā.

With regard to such an association with the lion, Srinivasan (1997: 298) states: “[...] it would seem that the Goddess has assimilated into her iconography a motif originating from non-Indian sources but sufficiently familiar in the local traditions so as to be capable of being assimilated.” Indeed, a considerable influence on the burgeoning representation of the Devī was probably exercised by the goddess Nanā or Nanaya, a Sumero-Akkadian and then Hellenistic deity, who herself takes on characteristics of the Mesopotamian goddess Innana-Ištar, typically associated with lions. The Rabatak inscription (northern Afghanistan) states that the king Kaniṣka I (c. 127/128 CE) derived his kingship from Nanā: she was, therefore, one of the most important deities in Kuṣāṇa’s pantheon.

In the visual language of the subcontinent, the lion is likely to express the bellicose, indomitable nature and charismatic attitude of the goddess, as well as her granting sovereignty to the ruler. Patently, the morpho-ethological characteristics of this animal, namely strength, majestic appearance, and ferocity, paved the way for his connection, in religio-historical processes, with the divine as well as royal power and martial sphere. Significantly, although the early centuries CE India was losing familiarity with living lions, the feline appears to be one of the most distinguishing features of the Indian warrior goddess: in the cultural and religious imagery, the lion had already become fixed as the fiercest among wild predatory animals, informing long-lasting lion-warrior imagery.

While the background and the rise of the goddess Durgā have been the object of numerous studies, the role of the lion attribute in the formation of her divine personality (*siṃhavāhinī*)

needs to be re-examined in greater depth in the light of recent research paradigms. This contribution, analysing the most significant among the earliest Indian iconographic and textual representations of the goddess on the lion, attempts to trace the genesis of this divine figure from the peculiar perspective of the association with the feline, which appears as a key element for an understanding of both the development and the functions of this deity.

Danuta Stasik, University of Warsaw, Poland

Poets on Combat for Secularism and Democracy: Context Ayodhya 1992

December 2022 will mark 30 years since the tragic events in Ayodhya, which were the culmination of the escalating Hindu-Muslim conflict around the Babri Masjid. It was a shock to the whole of Indian society, striking forcefully at democracy and secularism – the core values on which independent India was built. The literary world was not left indifferent to these developments. This presentation looks back to two telling examples of this, the poetry collections in Hindi – *Apnī zabān* and *Yah aisā samay hai* (both 1994), edited by Asad Zaidī and Viṣṇu Nāgar – that were published by SAHMAT (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, <https://sahmat.in/intropage.html#>), itself founded in an attempt to defend pluralistic and democratic creative expression. The paper will attempt a contextualised analysis, from a viewpoint of form and content, of the modes of creative expression undertaken by the poets acting in defence of the democratic, secular state.

Maria Puri, independent scholar

Reading between the lines: Dalip Kaur Tiwana's reflections on dissent and violence in Jimmī puche āsmān

A decades long attempt by the central government to control dissent in Punjab culminated in a military operation codenamed Bluestar (June 1984). Overtly aimed at flushing out Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale and his militant cohort from the Golden Temple, it led to the desecration of the sacred place by the army and an unwarranted bloodshed, soon to be followed by the assassination of Indira Gandhi (30 October 1984), anti-Sikh riots, an unprecedented growth of militancy in Punjab and division of Punjabi society along religious lines. Punjabi literature addressed the matter, trying to make sense of the traumatic event and its aftermath. Dalip Kaur Tiwana (1935-2020), too, provided, by way of her novel, *Jimmī puche āsmān /The Earth Asking the Sky* (1986), a fictionalised witness account informed by her experience as a university teacher whose students find themselves drawn into the vortex of political exigencies. A study of her reflections on dissent and violence in this context will constitute the subject matter of this paper.

Anna Trynkowska, University of Warsaw, Poland

Environmental Issues, Tribal People and a Reinterpretation of Indian Epic Tradition in a Bengali Short Story A Bird Mother (Pākhir Mā) by Sunil Gangopadhyay

The present paper deals with a short story *A Bird Mother (Pākhir Mā)* by one of the masters of modern Bengali literature, Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934–2012). First published in 1964 but

unfortunately still relevant today, the story was probably inspired by media reports about Siberian cranes (*Leucogeranus leucogeranus*), a critically endangered bird species that used to winter in India until 2002. Combining environmental and social concerns, the story shows how intricate interactions between wildlife, tribal people and agriculture communities in rural India can generate conflict and lead to aggression. The present paper analyses the story in detail, with the focus on the strategies used by the author to explain the attitudes towards tribes. Additionally, the paper suggests that the story can be read as a modern reinterpretation of an episode from Indian epic tradition.

Monika Browarczyk, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

Partition Literature in Hindi and Narratives of Violence Against Women

To date generations of people from South Asia grapple with traumatic experiences of havoc and violence prior to, during and in the aftermath of the Partition of British India. Writings in Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, and English, i.e. in languages spoken in the regions mostly affected by the turmoil of 1947, reflect the painful process of coming to terms with these experiences and of possible reconciliation with consequences of “the long shadow of partition” (Bhutalia 2015). Violence against women, often gruesome and unspeakable, was a facet of the Partition that occurred repeatedly but whose testimony and records were either censored and/or silenced by survivors and newly established states for diverse individual, communal and “nation-building” reasons (Bhutalia 1998). In my paper I would like to examine how Hindi novels from dating from the end of the 1950s to 2016 narrate instances of partition violence against women. With focus on Yashpal’s *Jhūthā sac* of 1958 and 1960, Bhishm Sahni’s *Tamas* of 1974 and Krishna Sobti’s *Gujrāt pākistān se gujrāt hindustān tak* of 2016 I scrutinize various narrative strategies used by the authors to review and retell instances of violence against women during the partition.

Weronika Rokicka, University of Warsaw, Poland

Gentle violence: Bengali middle class women living under patriarchy in Bani Basu's novels

On the surface, they seem to have comfortable lives and a status sought by many in the Indian society – women of Indian Bengali middle class enjoy many privileges: access to education, leisure time, and safety. However, the patriarchal norms imposed on them make them vulnerable as any transgression is perceived as an act of rebellion and punished harshly, although without physical violence. This presentation will aim to analyze selected novels by the acclaimed Indian writer Bani Basu, who gained recognition for portraying Bengali middle class with honesty and penetrating insight. Set in the second half of the 20th century, the narratives examine mechanisms of the patriarchal system in a society and class that are modern and conservative at once. Basu’s female protagonists struggle to accept the injustice they experience but even more the climate of silence that surrounds them.

Iłona Kędzia, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland

Cruel substances: on “binding” and “killing” in Tamil Siddha alchemical texts

In my presentation I will examine the concept of “cruelty” (*kaṭumai*) of physical substances in the Tamil Siddha alchemical literature, taking as a starting point an analysis of selected texts ascribed mostly to siddhar Yākōpu alias Rāmatēvar (ca. 17th-18th c.), a prominent author of the Tamil Siddha alchemical tradition. The alchemical works of Yākōpu (e.g. *Cuṇṇakkāṇṭam ārunūru*, *Cuṇṇam Munnūru*) repeatedly describe certain alchemical operations, the names of which allude to acts of violence, i.e. “biding” (*kaṭṭutal*) and “killing” (*kollutal*). Such operations, according to the texts, should be mastered and performed by alchemists on various material substances, i.a. on mercury, lead, or salt. In my talk I will explore the passages which shed light on the purpose, character, and importance of such operations in the alchemical tradition of the Siddhars. As my research to date has shown, certain preparations, such as the mysterious *cavukkāram* or *muppu* (“triple salt”), often regarded as a specialty of the Tamil Siddha tradition, are credited with extraordinary powers enabling aforementioned “killing” and “biding” of other substances. Such preparations, according to the texts, are endowed with “cruelty”, i.e. an exceedingly desirable quality of materials, acquired during their proper preparation. Studying of the concept of “cruelty” of the materials, I will also address the issue of non-human material agency related to the perspective of material ecocriticism, as it is presented in the Siddha texts.