

Shades of Violence: Aggression and Domination in Indian Culture

International conference

27-29 October 2022

Abstracts

Thursday, 27 October 2022

Keynote speaker: Daud Ali, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Understanding Violence among Political Elites in Early Medieval India

This paper will explore the range of attitudes and practices toward violence among early medieval courtly and political elites in north India. It will suggest that new codes violence (and non-violence) were introduced that served to sustain court hierarchy and regulate relations among agents in the complex political formations that were emerging at the time. The overall coercion of this system, a process perhaps akin to what Norbert Elias referred to as courticization in Europe, is revealed through projections that this courtly literature offered of so called ‘forest peoples’ deemed unfit for royal service.

David Pierdominici Leão, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland

The royal valaya and the divine makuṭa: violence as formative and legitimising element in the Pāṇḍya identity and dynastic narrative

Among the extensive repertoire of Pāṇḍya dynastic themes, the motif of the violent clash between a sovereign and Indra and the subsequent destruction of the god’s crown has an omnipresent attestation.

This *topos* of the Pāṇḍya monarch breaking the crown of the Lord of the Gods, which found large employment in the literary and epigraphical domains, originated around the 4th-5th centuries CE. According to the sources, the principal nucleus of this motif can be traced in *Cilapattikāram* XI, 17-30, which celebrates a Pāṇḍya monarch wearing Indra’s garland, capturing the clouds and breaking the God’s crown. In the following centuries, the narrative was employed in the *Tiruvīlaiyāṭarpurāṇam* by Perumparrapuliyūr Nampi (probably late 13th century) and its Sanskrit rendering, the *Hālāsyamāhātmya* (14th – 15th century), where the actions of the Pāṇḍya kings were inserted in the frame collecting the divine *līlas* of Śiva in Madurai. Since the early phase of the dynasty, this aggressive narrative of the clash between the king and Indra occupied the foremost importance in the Pāṇḍya imperial ideology, when the motif was employed as a tool of political and public display in the South. As we shall see, this violent thematic category became indeed the principal identifier idiom through which the Southern courts perceived the Pāṇḍya monarchy and its past, in both the religious and the “historical”-eulogistic literary productions.

After a survey of the motif and its presence in the first phases of the imperial official documents, the paper will focus on the re-employment of the category of the royal violence in the Teṅkāśi dynastic phase (14th – 18th century CE), under the lens of the official copper-plates issued by the late Pāṇḍya chancery and the previous Sanskrit literary production. As we shall see, the peculiar re-use of this mythological segment in the later period becomes the foremost tool through which the Teṅkāśi sovereigns will sustain and display their claim to be the legitimate heirs of the Madurai empire.

Aleksandra Turek, University of Warsaw, Poland

Rajput vocabulary of violence

The aim of my presentation is to reflect on certain keywords of the Rajput world formed by ‘predominantly masculine martial culture’ (Kasturi 2002: 12), which are crucial to understanding the phenomenon of violence in the Rajput milieu, the violence perpetrated regardless of *kshatriyahood* and other than on a battlefield. Keeping in mind that violence cannot be identified with any particular community, but specific types of aggressive acts may be associated with definite social/ class groups (Kasturi 2002: 20), this paper seeks to demonstrate that the terms, such as *bhomiyaṅvaṭ*, *bāroṭiyo*, *ḍakaitī*, *vair*, reveal the mechanisms of collective violence in the socio-political practice of the Rajputs. This will be useful in understanding the cultural background of such violent demeanours in opposition to a colonial stereotype of a Rajput as primitive, violent, but brave.

Edeltraud Harzer, University of Texas at Austin, USA

Violence in Service of Religion in pre-classical India

Martin Hříbek, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

Violence and Statehood in Modern Indian Thought

The turmoil of the First World War and its aftermath inspired many Indian political thinkers to reflect upon violence as a means of attaining statehood. On the one hand, the revolutionary violence justified by the leftist movement seemed to have successfully ushered a revolution in Russia, on the other hand the breakdown of the Austro-Hungarian empire enabled the rise of a number of new, mostly republican, states. Germany, the source of intellectual inspiration and hope of many bright souls across the British colonial empire was, at the same time, reduced to shambles. The contradicting possibilities that these developments offered for the cause of India’s independence are reflected in the variability of the response.

While Gandhian non-violence with all its contradictions had remained a mainstay of the Indian National Congress politics, alternative visions on nation building, statehood and means of its attainment are worth exploring since those visions too have remained in the repository of ideas for India’s posterity. This presentation is based on close reading of a number of Indian (mostly

Bengali) authors of the 1914-1939 period, including writings by Aurobinda Ghosh, speeches by the INC leader and the first mayor of Calcutta Municipal Corporation Chittaranjan Das, the economist and sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar, and Subhash Chandra Basu. Throughout my analysis I will focus on how and to what ends is their reflection of the Great War and its aftermath interwoven with their perceptions of violence in the Indian tradition.

Hermína Cielas, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland

The Slaughter of Innocents in Indian Perspective: An Incident in the Nativity Narrative as Described in Kristubhāgavatam

The paper analyses parts of the ninth canto of *Kristubhāgavatam*, a Sanskrit epic poem on the life and deeds of Jesus Christ by P.C. Devassia (1906-2006). The author, a Sanskrit scholar and poet from Kerala, finished the composition in 1976. The ninth canto, titled *vidvadāgamanam herodakṛtam śiśumāraṇam ca*, “The Arrival of Sages and the Slaughter of Innocents Perpetrated by Herod”, describes the incident of the nativity narrative of the *Gospel of Matthew* in which the king of Judea, Herod the Great, threatened by the prophecy of the birth of a new king, ordered the slaying of all male children under two years of age near Bethlehem. In *Kristubhāgavatam*, events are depicted in an ornate and elaborate style that characterizes the *mahākāvya* genre. The paper examines selected passages from the text, the rendition of the original names of the characters, and the occurrence of Indian motifs in the biblical context.