



**Panel's title : ... Representations of the body in religious, literary and visual texts in South Asian traditions**

**Coordinator (Affiliation, University...)** : Diana Dimitrova, Full Professor, Université de Montréal, Canada

**Language** : English

**Topics** : Religious Studies, South Asian Studies

**Panel presentation** :

The panel discusses the representation of the body and embodied practices in religious and literary texts as well as in the media in South Asian traditions from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE up to present-day (2010). The papers will focus on the conceptions of the body in ritual, mystic, devotional and political contexts, on the relations and types of communication between the bodies of humans and the embodied figures, as well as on the links between religion, ideology and the representations of the body in written and visual forms. The fields of inquiry include bhakti, kingship rituals, gender, difference, politics, power and identity. Significant points of discussion are the role that the concept of the body and the processes of embodiment play in ritual and worship and the importance of their social and political implications. The discussions will contribute to our understanding of the interrelations between religion, ideology, the body and embodied practices. The papers are based on methodological analysis of written and visual texts that have their origin in South Asia.

**Key words** :\_South Asian traditions, Body, South Asia, India

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**Participants : (6 participants)**

**Name(s) (Affiliation, University...)** : .....

- 1) Chris Austin, Associate Professor, Dalhousie University, Canada

**Communication's title** : *The vamsa as Body: Seizure, Illness and Restriction of the Body in the Harivamsa*

**Language** : English : X



**Presentation :**

The *Harivamsa* or Lineage of the Lord (Krishna), dating from roughly the 2nd or 3rd century CE, provides the oldest continuous account of Krishna's life, and establishes both the divine and genealogical identity of Krishna as a form of Vishnu and as a Yadava warrior. In obvious ways (reflected, for example, in the text's title and in the genealogical materials within it), the poem is concerned with patriline and male descent. Less immediately obvious are the poem's strategies for dramatizing and exorcizing anxieties over the failure of patriline in the narratives of Krishna's life. This paper takes up the notion of "body" as an interpretive tool in two closely related senses for examining these narratives. Firstly, I focus on the poem's recurring images of corporeal seizure, illness and restriction in the accounts of Krishna and his male offspring. Secondly, I ask whether the *vamsa* or lineage of Krishna itself may be conceived as a male body, threatened and restored together with its individual members in the *Harivamsa's* narratives. Particularly these latter reflections set the study in closer conversation with recent scholarship on Vaishnava *bhakti* and the body, the construction of masculinity in South Asia, and the cult of *pitṛ* veneration.

**Name(s) (Affiliation, University...): ...**

2) Anne E. Monius, Full Professor, Harvard Divinity School, USA

**Communication's title : Tinged with Pain and Promise: Images of Bodies in the Poetry of Appar**

**Language :** English

**Presentation :**

The celebrated seventh-century *nāyaṅār* (poet-saint), Tirunāvukkaracar—more affectionately known by the Tamil-speaking Śaiva community as Appar (“Father”)—sings to his beloved Lord Śiva that his own human body is but a piece of filth, lacking any form, diseased, foully decayed, and harboring great stench (4.75.7). In poem after poem, Appar characterizes himself as ill, as burning with an unnamed intestinal malady, as arthritic, suffering, and wholly unworthy of his lord’s saving grace. Yet elsewhere Appar sings of his body as a temple and his heart as a servant of the lord (4.76.4). What is the role of the body (Tamil *mey*, *uṭampu*, *kāyam*) in the poetry of this beloved Tamil Śaiva poet? This paper examines representations of bodies—both the poet’s and Śiva’s—throughout Appar’s poetic corpus, ultimately arguing that human and divine bodies constitute a fraught, complex, fragile, and wholly unique meeting ground for lord and devotee.



**Name(s) (Affiliation) :**

**3) Stefania Cavaliere, Lecturer, L'Orientale University of Naples, Italy**

**Communication's title : Allegorical representations of body struggles in the  
*Prabodhacandrodaya* tradition**

**Language : English**

**Presentation :**

The depiction of the body plays a central role in the Sanskrit drama *Prabodhacandrodaya* (11<sup>th</sup> cent.), a psychomachia of Vedanta inspiration describing the allegorical struggle within the Self (*Jīva*) to achieve wisdom and enlightenment. His progenies Discrimination (*Viveka*) and Bewilderment (*Mahāmoha*) are represented as two kings engaged in a terrific war together with their armies composed by various psychological and physical states (Desire, Greed, Rage, Contentment etc.). On the one side the body is the abode of delusion that entraps the self to the world, on the other side it is the means to attain final release. This text became very popular and had a long tradition of translations and adaptations into different vernacular languages throughout the following centuries. Interestingly the representation of the body changes depending on religious and cultural settings. My paper will analyse a selection of passages from Hindi texts belonging to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century dealing with this allegorical battle, to show how the body is alternatively used as a symbol of religious and moral rigor or else as the embodiment of political power.

**Name(s) (Affiliation) :**

**4) Diana Dimitrova, Full Professor, Université de Montréal, Canada**

**Communication's title : The body in the devotional tradition of Radhasoami**

**Language : English : X**

**Presentation :**

This paper studies the body in the devotional tradition of Radhasoami of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century, and its major religious texts, such as Shivdayal's *Sur baccan (Essential Writings)*. It seeks to explore embodied practices, as represented by the notion of *guru-bhakti* and by elements of Radhasoami religiosity which invite the devotee to long for a *darshana* of the guru and encourage



followers to mediate on him. I will discuss the concept of *arati* in Radhasoami, which represents an internalization of ritual worship. In the process of this internalized *arati* the devotee might offer to his guru the parts of his inner body. Additionally, the teachings of Radhasoami require that their teachings require that a guru be alive and present in a bodily form for the devotee, and they regard the living guru as an incarnate form of the Absolute. The devotees long for the sacred sight (*darshana*) of their guru and are encouraged to direct their loving devotion to the guru. My paper will study both the textual representation and the ritual practices of the body in Radhasoami.

**Name(s) (Affiliation) :**

**5) Nandi Bhatia, Full Professor, University of Western Ontario, Canada**

**Communication's title :**

**“And I become aware of religious differences”: Reading the 1947 Partition through Literature**

**Language :** English : X

**Presentation :**

The violence that accompanied the 1947 Partition of India is often remembered as the story of communal divisions along religious differences. As Urvashi Butalia tells us, such differences resulted in a form of identity politics in which religious symbols were mapped onto the bodies of men and women, many of whom offered to die or be killed by family members “in an attempt to protect the ‘purity’ and ‘sanctity’ of their religion.” Literary texts such as Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* bring an additional layer to this story, suggesting instead how religion was refashioned and deployed in the wake of nationalistic self-determination, and sharpened through violent enactments on the bodies of men, women and children. As Lenny, the child protagonist of *Cracking India* says, “There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. . . . And I become aware of religious differences” (101). With attention to *Cracking India*, this paper addresses the role of literary texts in offering new insights on discourses of religious difference and bodily violence, as they narrate ordinary people’s experiences of the Partition.



**Name(s) (Affiliation) :**

**6) Gita V. Pai, Assistant Professor, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, USA**

**Communication's title : When Humans Pose as Hindu Gods**

**Language :** English

**Presentation :**

In 2010 Hindu organizations in America protested against *Newsweek* for portraying Barack Obama as Shiva Nataraja. On the news magazine's cover, the U.S. President mimicked the Hindu deity's cosmic dance by balancing on one leg, holding various policy issues with his multiple arms, and raising his left leg across his body. News agencies even reported on various reactions to Obama being depicted as Lord Shiva.

The tendency to use the bodies of humans in the guise of Hindu gods appears not only in print media but also in advertising to market consumer goods. This paper examines recent case studies in the U.S. and India to explore the representations of humans as Hindu gods and to study religious groups' responses to what they view as the commercial misappropriation of their sacred iconography. In doing so, this paper draws on bell hooks' 1992 essay which refers to cultural commodification as "eating the other," to understand the commodification of human bodies as Hindu gods for a consuming public.