Jnanapravaha

JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI

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CONTENTS

Director's Note

It is that time of year when all of nature anxiously waits to be soaked by life-giving rain and become verdant again. It is also that time of year when we uncover our newly-minted plans through both, yet unexplored frontiers and renewed ones. There is so much promise and so much anticipation as we gear up for a new academic year, welcoming a fresh cohort of eager learners with boundless curiosity who span the globe.

Themes that will be addressed in the course of the year include the Idea of Beauty, Forms of Bhakti or personal devotion as exemplified in peninsular India, Pahari painting from the Indian hill states, popular religious prints of the 19th and 20th centuries, Jain narrative manuscripts, and maritime trade, to name a few. The Criticism and Theory rubric will be unpacking Beauty through manifold lenses — starting from Antiquity to Enlightenment, Islamic notions of divinity to adornment, Chinese theories of music, poetry, calligraphy, and painting, and ending with Indian medieval poetry and its rendition into painted books. These will be punctuated with art-historical notions of hybridity as witnessed through monuments of Palmyra, Norman Sicily, China and Tibet, and finally Nepal. Our attempt to read material culture through foregrounding philosophical tenets, theology, religious texts, and commentaries, along with literature, archaeology, social sciences, and different histories strengthens. Alongside this, the Aesthetics rubric continues its march through another yearlong course, emboldened with currency in research and scholarship. As always, the voices of practitioners, whether architects, photographers, artists, dancers, or filmmakers, will also be heard, recorded, and preserved for posterity.

The inner pages have information on all the above as well as write-ups on our previous programmes.

Do join us on our mission, as we would be grateful for your presence.

With my warmest wishes,

Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.
Director

AESTHETICS

A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

JPM's Aesthetics offerings include:
(1) an academic yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Yoga & Tantra, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (3) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Southeast Asian Art and Architecture, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (4) a fortnight of public seminars and lectures in Islamic Aesthetics; (5) an ongoing series of public seminars in Buddhist Aesthetics; (6) an ongoing series of public seminars in Southasian Painting; and (7) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Indian Aesthetics

S.H. Raza
Untitled (The Three Progressives)
1940s

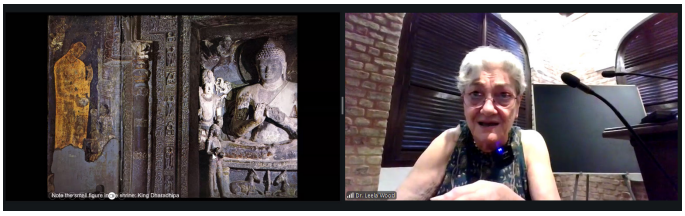
This year, Jnanapravaha's Indian Aesthetics (IA) course attracted students from Dubai and New Zealand, in addition to many from all over India; the hybrid mode is able to efficaciously negotiate the inclusion of remote learners as well as those who come to our heritage space. IA resource scholars, too, were spread over a wide geography, with Dr. Archana Venkatesan in Davis, California; Dr. Crispin Branfoot and Dr. Zehra Jumabhoy in London; Dr. Shailendra Bhandare in Oxford; Dr. Parul Singh and Dr. Neeraja Poddar in Germany; Dr. Mrinalini Sil in Amsterdam, and Dr. Kalyani Madhura Ramachandran in Shanghai. The rich stream of the course is fed by international expertise. Our other resource scholars are from the Indian cities of Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, and Gurugram. Mumbai and Pune scholars conducted their sessions at our aesthetically restored space. The course, which examines 5,000 years of visual material from South Asia through more than forty illustrated sessions on curated subjects, continues to evolve to include current research. Our scholars bring to vibrant life the varied contexts in which this art was created, engaging in discussion with our students, and

introducing them to the most important examples of visual art in the Indian subcontinent. Thirty-seven students enrolled in the course this year.

Our Director, Dr. Rashmi Poddar's pioneering pedagogy offers students a formal and epistemological framework that can be used to decode Indian art though classical Indian aesthetics, mobilising Sanskrit texts and Indic philosophical tenets. She introduced the indigenous *Rasa* theory, presented by Bharata Muni in the *Natyashastra* in relation to dramaturgy. This aesthetic theory of emotion can be deployed to analyse the form, content, and meaning of Indic visual art. Dr. Poddar introduced terms such as 'iconography', 'iconology' and 'symbolism' to students, while Dr. Veena Londhe's exploration of Sanskrit poetics and the *Rasa Sutra* traversed important terrain, culminating in an elucidation of *dhvani* or suggestion in art, which was theorised by medieval Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta.

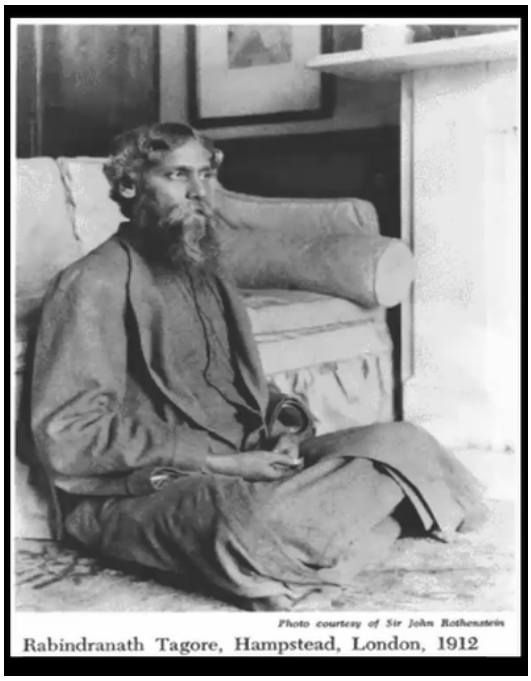
Dr. Kurush Dalal's comprehensive survey of the Harappan civilisation was followed by Dr. Naman Ahuja's discussion of Sunga terracottas, and Dr. Shailendra Bhandare's magisterial presentation on Satavahana numismatics, elucidating the early artistic production in the subcontinent. Dr. Supriya Rai and Swati Chemburkar presented a nuanced understanding of Buddhist philosophy and art, as well as the rich tradition of *Jataka* and *Avadana* narratives related to the three most important types of Buddhist religious practice: *Theravada*, *Mahayana*, and *Vajrayana*. Dr. Kalyani Ramachandran offered a close look at the art of Phanigiri, one of the early Buddhist sites in South India. Through her examination of Jain philosophy and art, Dr. Viraj Shah explicated the dominantly ascetic nature of this tradition that elevates *vira rasa* or the heroic sentiment above all others. In this philosophy, the Jina is a warrior who conquers the senses.

Arvind Sethi examined representations of *Vedic* and Hindu deities, displaying that iconographic elements are vital in the identification of these deities, which included major gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Ganesha but also gods who are now viewed as minor: Brahma, Surya, the *navagrahas* (or the nine planets) and the *dikpalas* (or the guardians of the directions). Dr. Rashmi Poddar's lecture on Devi examined this concept which envisages a unitary, independent, and powerful feminine principle. The worship of Devi and Shakti were drawn into esoteric tantric systems which deviate from traditional religious strands. Dr. Poddar showed that tantric practices, which at one time were pervasive in most religious systems in the Indian subcontinent, are misunderstood today, having been reviled since the British era in India. Swati Chemburkar examined depictions of *Shaiva Pashupata* ascetics found in Southeast Asia, which indicate that they were probably responsible for the spread of *Shaivism* to the region in medieval times. Dr. Pushkar Sohoni presented a sweeping survey of Hindu temple architecture and his primary research on Maratha temples. Regional examples of the Hindu temple were elucidated by Dr. Crispin Branfoot, who discussed South Indian temples and their processional practices, and Kamalika Bose who looked at different types of temples in Bengal and Gujarat. The sessions on temple architecture were enlivened by a freshly curated session in which Dr. Archana Venkatesan presented the poetry of Andal and the worship practices at her temple in Srivilliputhur. Dr. Riyaz Latif explored Islamic aesthetics through funerary architecture that shows affiliation with West Asian forms.



While the first half of the IA course focussed more on sculpture and architecture, in January it began a deeper engagement with painting. Dr. Leela Wood explored the earliest subcontinental examples of painting which are seen in the peerless murals of Ajanta, studying Cave 17 at the site and examining connections with the *Chitrasutra* of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*. Dr. Shailka Mishra presented sessions on Jain painting of Western India, *Chaurapanchashika* paintings, and several Sufi *Chandayana* manuscripts, bridging the wide chronological gap between Ajanta and 14th- to 16th-century paintings with references to Buddhist manuscripts and the important Gwalior *Quran*. Mughal, Pahari, Rajput, and Deccani painting were discussed in Roda Ahluwalia's sessions, while Dr. Parul Singh and Dr. Mrinalini Sil examined the 18th-century paintings of Awadh and Murshidabad. Dr. Neeraja Poddar presented a newly inducted session on the narrative paintings

of the *Bhagavata Purana* which centre on Krishna, while Dr. Harsha Dehejia put forward his thesis that while Krishna *shringara bhakti* begins in *dvaita* or dualism, its true culmination is in *advaita* or monism.



Rabindranath Tagore, Hampstead, London, 1912

In February, March, and April, the Indian Aesthetics course delved into trade connections in the littoral sphere, and the colonial, nationalist, modern, and contemporary art of the subcontinent. Dr. Pia Brancaccio's freshly curated session was a fascinating exploration of Indian Ocean trade that looked closely at the Ulhas river estuary, which was an important landing site for trading vessels in the early centuries of the first millennium.

In the colonial period of the subcontinent, European and Indian artists worked for both Indian and Western patrons, creating a varied and rich repertoire in the region's visual art, which requires nuanced analysis because of the complex conditions of its creation. Dr. Jaya Kanoria used Edward Said's methodology in his seminal *Orientalism* to effectively examine art created in the subcontinent's colonial period. Dr. Suryanandini Narain's exposition made it clear that photography arrived in the subcontinent very quickly after its use in the West, and that the local population rapidly subverted the medium to represent an aspirational reality. While the colonial masters deployed photography for surveillance and control, indigenous usage bent it to the desires of the colonised.

Dr. Jaya Kanoria showed that nationalistic ideas shaped early-20th-century Indian aesthetics in important ways through her presentation on Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghosh whose political and philosophical positions were influential in shaping their literary and artistic output. They not only moulded the aesthetics of their time but were in turn fashioned by it. Dr. Pushkar Sohoni's thorough survey of Indian colonial architecture was augmented by a deep exploration of a unique colonial building-type: the colonial market hall. The scholar's primary research on the subject showed that the built form outgrows and sometimes upends the original purposes of its creation; in the case of the colonial market hall, a building originally meant to provide a safe and sanitary environment for the British *memsahib* while she bought food items and household goods, was subverted by locals. The area demarcated by the market hall, designated for vending goods, expanded as it was sometimes surrounded by unplanned local stalls. Dr. Sohoni's session on Indian modernist architecture included an overview of its most important practitioners and referred to Modernist architectural masterpieces not only in India but also in present-day Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, giving students a comprehensive picture of this genre in the subcontinent. In Dr. Zehra Jumabhoy's session on Modernist painting in India, she presented her research on the Progressive Artists' Group through a curatorial lens. Her thoughtful critical examination of the group's composition and their contribution to Indian Modernist art strongly engaged the attention of students.

To bring a taste of contemporary practice to our students, the Indian Aesthetics course 2025–26 included an in-person lecture by the renowned architect Rahul Mehrotra, who spoke about the theoretical and critical approaches that underlie his practice as well as several important projects he has undertaken over the years. This deep and wide-ranging exploration gave our audience a sense of the breadth of work undertaken by this seminal practitioner. The session was also free for the public and was an offering under Jnanapravaha's Creative Processes rubric.

As is our usual practice, IA students received curated readings for each IA session. A glossary of terms and additional bibliographies including an essential reading list were provided on our

learning management portal JPM Think. Twenty-four students enrolled in the IA diploma, which involves three closely-guided writing assignments that receive extensive feedback. Sessions on academic writing are included in the course to provide insights not only on writing but also on reading academic material. The IA Diploma aims to enable independent writing skills and the ability to produce publishable material. IA 2025–26 students wrote their theses on topics such as 'Morphing Forms: Exploring forms of "Indian" through the lens of Indo-Saracenic architecture', 'Painting a Picture of Blue: Colour, Culture, and the Shifting Signifiers in Indian Visual History', 'Embodied Energy: Shakti, Sacred Space, and the Aesthetics of the Yogini Temples in Medieval India', 'Landscapes of Dominion in the Kingdom of Mysore: A Comparative Study of 18th–19th Century Landscape Paintings and Mural Art at the Daria Daulat Bagh Palace, Srirangapatna', 'The Aesthetics of Liberation: Visualising Impermanence and the Final Release in Buddhist and Jaina Art', and 'The Wound That Does Not Close: Somnath Hore, the Bengal Famine of 1943, and the Interrogation of *Rasa*'.

Many essays and theses originally written towards completion of the IA Diploma have been externally published since the last decade, the most recent being a revised version of Vedant Srinivas's IA thesis, titled 'Photography and Cinema in Colonial India: Confronting the Other (and the I) through Image', in *Dastavezi: The Audio-Visual South Asia* (University of Heidelberg). Vedant was an alumnus of IA 2022–23, and his first essay written for the Diploma on the topic 'Sensory Affordances of the Pitalkhora Yaksha' was published in the *JPM Quarterly* of July–September 2024. His second essay, 'The River of Madhurya: A Folio from the Isarda *Bhagavata Purana*', had been published prior to this in *Critical Collective*. The brilliant Vedant has several other publications to his credit; he has done Jnanapravaha Mumbai proud.

The institution tirelessly continues its mission to disseminate authentic knowledge of aesthetics to the wider public through the Indian Aesthetics course and its other programmes, presenting sessions by well-established scholars who are actively engaged in research. We eagerly look forward to the next iteration of the IA course; each year affords a further opportunity for expansion and sharing. **– *J.K.***

PAST PROGRAMMES

Cosmos and Eternity, Creation, Dissolution, and 'Re-Creation': Vishnu on Ananta

March 26th & 27th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Vasudha Narayanan (Distinguished Professor, Department of Religion, and Director, Center for the study of Hindu Traditions (CHiTra) at the University of Florida)

In her talks, Dr. Vasudha Narayanan argued that in recreating the cosmos after its dissolution, and in taking different forms or *avataras*, Vishnu also indulges in 'recreation' or *lila*. Examining images of *Anantashayi* Vishnu sculpted until the 13th century, the scholar marked an efflorescence of this reclining form in Central India between the 9th and 12th centuries CE. The Sanskrit word 'Vishnu' means 'immanent' and 'all-pervasive' while the word '*ananta*' means 'infinite', 'without end', and therefore 'transcendent'. 'Ananta' is the name of the serpent on which Vishnu reclines; it is also used

for Vishnu himself. The image offers a telegraphic code for the Supreme being who encompasses endless space and endless time.

In the Khmer temple at Phanom Rung (10th to 13th centuries CE, present-day Thailand), an 11th-century *Anantashayi* Vishnu, probably added by the Khmer King Suryavarman II, is seen below a representation of dancing Shiva. This pairing is found in many temples, including the one at Chidambaram. While dancing Shiva is the embodiment of dynamism, it has a deeply still centre. Conversely, *Anantashayi* Vishnu, reclining in *yoganidra*, explodes with dynamic creative potential. Dancing Shiva, especially *Nataraja*, pointing towards his foot which is a protective refuge for devotees, is emblematic of the deity as creator and destroyer; *Anantashayi* or *Sheshashayi* Vishnu, lying inert on the serpent Ananta, is the creator and sustainer, and the deity who the gods and men approach for protection, the very purpose of Vishnu's many incarnations. At the end of each cycle of time, dissolution comes when *Anantashayi* Vishnu withdraws the cosmos into himself in his *yoganidra*. The scholar argued that the representation of baby Krishna on a banyan leaf (*Vatapatrashayi)* is used interchangeably with the *Anantashayi* Vishnu form in texts such as the *Mahabharata*, where descriptions of the two representations are found in close proximity, and the sage Markandeya is drawn into the child's body, within which he sees the entire world. This theme is found in Alvar poetry, and seen in Srivilliputhur where *Anantashayi* Vishnu is called *Vatapatrashayi*. *Anantashayi* Vishnu may be paired with the churning of the ocean of milk for the auspicious *nidhis* (seen at Badami, and at opposite entrances at several Cambodian sites including Preah Vihear and Vat Phou), and sometimes represented just below Ananta's coils as at Kalinjar and at the Sun temple, Modhera. At Pallava sites such as Mahabalipuram, *Anantashayi* is paired with the goddess Durga. The two deities come together in the killing of Madhu and Kaitabha (born from Vishnu's earwax) in the *Devi Mahatmaya*. Vishnu's *Yogamaya* (who sometimes acts in the world on his behalf) is seen by some scholars as connected with Durga, who is the sister of Vishnu in some stories.

Indian literature describes Vishnu as reclining on an ocean of water or an ocean of milk as he performs his *lila*, but different texts relate the tale differently. The relation between texts and art is not clear; texts generally follow the creation of related art, but not always. The first mention of Narayana on waters is in the *Narayana Suktam* of the *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, dated to approximately 800 BCE. It includes the Sanskrit words *anantam* and *samudre* – 'confluence' in Vedic Sanskrit – but does not mention Brahma, Lakshmi or a snake. The *Vana Parva* and *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata* mention Vishnu reclining on Ananta more than once. They describe the sprouting of a lustrous lotus from Vishnu's navel and the creator Brahma's birth upon it; Brahma's harassment by the demons Madhu and Kaitabha who steal the four *Vedas* from him; and Vishnu as Hayagriva (the horse-headed deity) killing the demons on his thighs before retrieving the *Vedas*. An image depicting the latter is obliquely seen in a Kashmiri sculpture but is clearly represented at Banteay Srei, Cambodia.

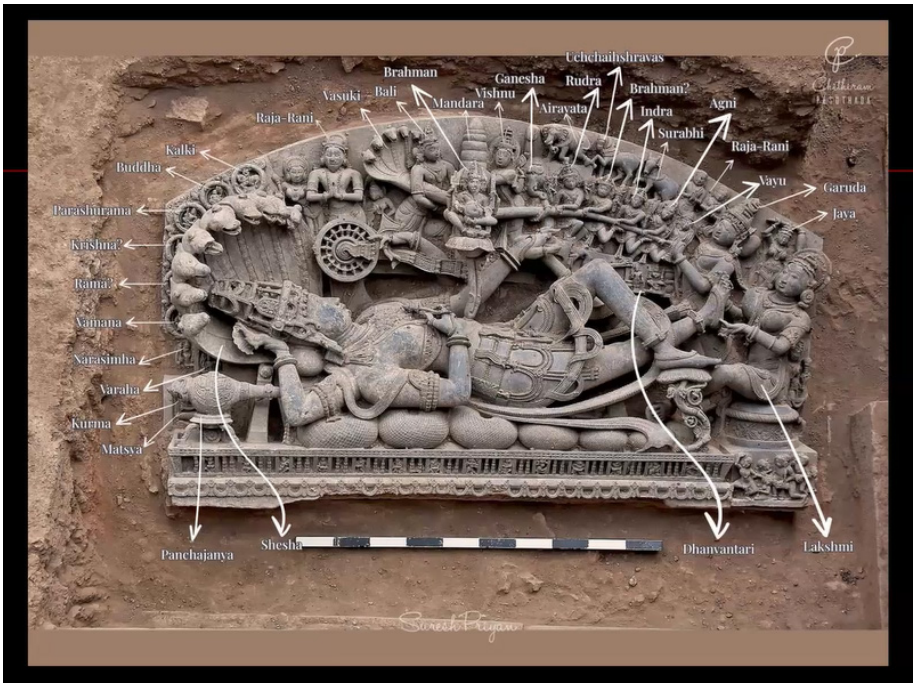
The ocean of nectar or milk is mentioned in the *Harivamsa* (1st century CE) which does not

mention a snake. Arguably, Tamil *Sangam Puram* poetry (1st to 5th centuries CE) contains the first literary mention of a material depiction of a deity reclining on a snake bed: such a deity is described at Yathoktakari outside Kanchipuram in the Tamil text *Perumpannarrupadai*. Lakshmi is described as reposing on Vishnu's chest in *Silappadhikaram*, a 4th- or 5th-century Tamil literary text that mentions Srirangam, a famous site with an *Anantashayi* Vishnu temple, in the tale of Kovalan and Kannagi. Sanskrit texts on sculpture have multiple mentions of Vishnu on Ananta. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Brahma is born on the lotus and Vishnu mentions the ocean of milk as one of his favourite places, but he is not described as reclining on Ananta here. In the *Parama Samhita*, a *Pancharatra Agama* of an uncertain date, Narayana is described as reclining on an ocean of milk, which until that point is known from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as the location of the *samudra manthana* (churning) narrative. It is only between the 4th and 5th centuries that the *Puranas* (specifically *Vayu Purana*) mention all three elements: Vishnu reclining on Ananta in an ocean of milk. This combination is definitely present in the verses of the Tamil Alvar poets written between the 7th and 9th centuries. Intriguingly, an early 6th-century reference to such a triune composition occurs first not in India but in a Sanskrit inscription by Queen Kulaprabhavati (5th to 6th centuries CE) in Cambodia, where the form became popular.

Texts affiliated to *Vaikhanasa*, a *Vaishnava* theology considered a stream of the *Agama*, present a typology of sitting and reclining Vishnu images. Theoretically, there are four kinds of reclining Vishnu images: yoga, *bhoga*, *vira* and *abhichara*. The first three categories are classified depending on the number of arms, the presence of Lakshmi, and of weapons, but exceptions are numerous. *Abhicharika* images, placed away from habitation, were connected to sorcery and probably commissioned by kings desiring the defeat of an enemy. Identification of *Anantashayana* images by various scholars as one or the other type are contested.

Pancharatra Vaishnava theology, first seen in the *Narayaniya* section of the *Mahabharata* and expanded by texts written in the first millennium CE, is also considered a parallel stream to the *Agama*. *Pancharatra* recognises five *vyuhas* or emanations of Vishnu: Para Vasudeva in Vaikuntha as *Anantashayi* Vishnu reclining on an ocean of milk, from whom come Sankarshana, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, who in time came to be seen as taking care of Creation, Protection, and Annihilation. This theology became known in the Khmer empire in pre-Angkorian times and is seen in material form in numerous Hindu temples to this day. In *Vaishnava* theology, *archa* images (those undergoing worship) are not meant to be referred to in material terms as they are considered to be super-transcendent *shuddha sattva*.

Loosely classifying *Anantashayi* Vishnu images into early images, images in *garbha grihas* in South India, and Central Indian images in which a horse is seen sculpted below the coils of Ananta, the scholar noted that the form was sculpted with either two or four arms with or without weapons. In some cases, Brahma is seen seated on a lotus emerging from his navel, and Lakshmi may be seated at Vishnu's feet. Sometimes Bhudevi is also present. Vishnu could either face the devotee, reclining either on his left or right side to ensure directional correctness, or be supine, looking towards the heavens. Many stories and historical incidents confirm the head to the north as inauspicious; bodies of the dead



are traditionally placed in this direction since ancient times in the region. The reason for this is not confirmed by texts on iconography. Only 13% of the Southasian images considered by Dr. Narayanan are exceptions in the head being placed in the west or the north, the most famous being the deity at Srirangam, which faces south with the head in the west. Usually, the head would have been placed in the east resulting in the 'reverse reclining' form. Some images are found in caves where it is more difficult to control directional requirements. In Cambodia, the head is invariably placed in the accepted directions. Subsidiary figures such as sages (including Markandeya), *navagraha* or nine planets, *dashavatara* or incarnations of Vishnu (sung by Periyalvar Tirumoli in connection with Srirangam), the *saptamatrikas*, Madhu and Kaitabha, and *nagas* or snakes (seen in Patala where Ananta resides according to the *Bhagavata Purana*) might be sculpted in an *Anantashayi* Vishnu panel, to show his creation of the cosmos. This is found as early as the 7th century in Badami and is spectacularly sculpted at Sinkhed Raja. In the Chhapan Mahal Museum at Mandu, the *dashavatara* are sculpted from right to left, an intriguing exception.

Anantashayi Vishnu images were common in early times in South Asia and Southeast Asia. They are found in stepwells (such as the 11th-century Rani ki Vav, Patan, Gujarat) and tanks, along riverbanks and on mountains. A massive representation (15.4 metres long) is seen on the banks of the Brahmani river at Saranga, Dhenkanal District, Odisha; it seems to float on water when the river floods. In the fields in Thondur, Tamil Nadu, *Anantashayi* Vishnu's crown is similar to the tall crowns seen in Cambodia, where the script, called *Pallava Grantha*, is similar to the Tamil Brahmi script of Pallava times. Another *Anantashayi* Vishnu image reclines near the Charan Ganga river in what is now Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh.

The earliest sculpted *Anantashayi* Vishnu (401 CE) on a looped serpent, and a churning panel are found at Udayagiri in Madhya Pradesh. The earliest images show Vishnu, Ananta, and sometimes Brahma. The presence of Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu, is seen much later. Exceptions are rife: for instance, the 7th-century *Anantashayi* sculpture on a solid block representing the serpent in the cave at Mahabalipuram presents the composite story of Vishnu and the demons Madhu and Kaitabha, but does not show Brahma. Some examples from Madhya Pradesh are notable: at Sindursi (5th–6th centuries) near Jabalpur, Brahma sits on the lotus emerging from *Anantashayi* Vishnu's navel as he rests on a looped serpent, while Madhu and Kaitabha are seen near Vishnu's feet. The superb *Anantashayi* panel at Deogarh or the representation at Tigawa (where, however, the sculptural programme of the early temple may be later) might be the first instances of the appearance of Lakshmi.

Chappan Mahal, Madhya Pradesh, 13th cent. CE

Today, *Anantashayi* Vishnu images as main deities in *garbha grihas* are mainly seen in South India, for instance at Tiruvanantapuram, the largest being at Tirumayam (8th century CE). At Malayadipatti the form is present in a cave. Stucco images are common and need constant repair. In North India, *Anantashayi* Vishnu in a *garbha griha* was recorded by Meister at Osian (present-day Rajasthan). An inscription mentions such an image in a Madhya Pradesh temple (where the form was known as Mondaswami).

Among the *Anantashayi* Vishnu panels in Central India, the one at Sindkhed Raja, now in Northeastern Maharashtra, is important. Many sites are located near Indore and Bhopal: at Udaigiri and Vidisha, through which the Tropic of Cancer passed in Gupta times, the sun when directly overhead would have shone on the representations of Vishnu. A sculpture today in the Kota museum has many subsidiary images around the main deity. A horse facing towards Vishnu's head stands below Ananta's coils. This intriguing feature, for which a single explanation is elusive, is present in many *Anantashayi* Vishnu panels made between the 9th and 12th centuries

in Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. The horse has many associations: Hayagriva is sometimes pictured as a horse rather than a horse-headed deity; the horse Ucchaishravas, a *nidhi* that came from the churning of the ocean of milk, comes to mind because jars (apparently full of *nidhis*) are sometimes carved alongside the horse. The rich associations of the horse can be traced back to the *Rigveda* and are found in the *Shatapatha Brahmana* (1064 CE) which mentions that the sacrificial horse is born in the *samudra*, as well as the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*. While the *Ashwamedha* or horse sacrifice was not performed by the kings who commissioned these Central Indian sculptures, it is possible that they homologised the sacrifice with Vishnu, leading to the inclusion of the horse in these panels. Michael Willis has argued that evidence of *Vaikhanasa* theology, originating in the Andhra region, is present at 5th-century-CE Vidisha. *Vaikhanasa* attempted to synthesise Vedism with the worship of Vishnu Narayana in its theology and rituals, so that Vishnu Narayana himself becomes the sacrifice, in an internalisation of worship that superseded the Ashwamedha.

The second day of the seminar focussed on Southeast Asian sites, particularly those of pre-Angkorian and Angkorian Cambodia studied by Dr. Narayanan, where *Anantashayi* Vishnu sculptures abound. The Western Baray, a human-made reservoir, lying west of Angkor Thom and northwest of Angkor Wat, begun by Suryavarman I and completed by Udayadityavarman II, is home to the island of West Mebon. In 1936, a local farmer's dream led excavators to a damaged bronze image of *Anantashayi* Vishnu in a well at the West Mebon temple site which is currently under restoration. The upper part of the sculpture is now in the National Museum at Phnom Penh. The smaller fragments of this image were reassembled at the Musee Guimet in 2024, where a 3-D restitution of the head and bust was also attempted following results of stylistic and technical research, producing a handsome, gilded version. Research shed light on the technical aspects of the original bronze figure and its restoration in the 1950s. An image of the entire sculpted panel with Vishnu, Brahma, and Lakshmi was created at the Musee Guimet. The scholar speculated that this was probably a *bhoga shayana* image, with Vishnu reclining

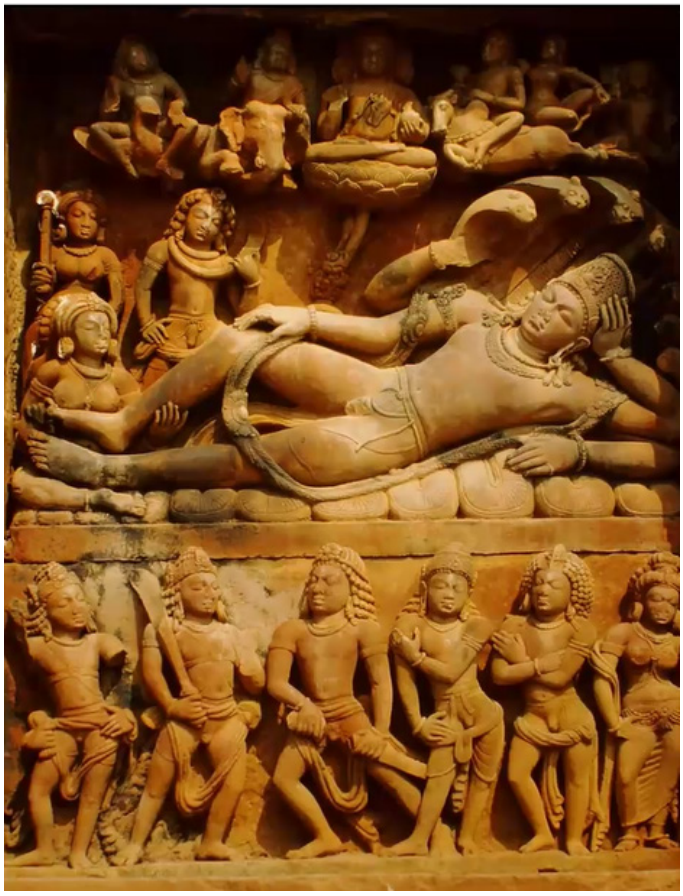
Proposition of 3D restitution of the head and bust of the West Mebon Vishnu following results of stylistic and technical research conducted by Pascal Mora, Archéovision (CNRS and University of Bordeaux)
© Archeovision / UMR 6034 (Archéosciences Bordeaux) / Pascal Mora

in enjoyment, his fingers in an unusual *mudra*. The phrase 'dreaming the creation of the world', sometimes used in connection with *Anantashayi* Vishnu, was strongly critiqued by the speaker as having no basis in texts and inscriptions where Vishnu is in *yoganidra*, a wakeful meditative state, and creates a real world. The West Mebon image is unique, both due to its massive size and because it is currently the only surviving one which was worshipped in a main temple in the Angkorian world. Bronze or metal images in India were smaller in size, were usually standing icons, and not made for worship in the main temple; they were commonly *utsava* or festival images. *Vaikhanasa* texts include an injunction against a reclining Vishnu festival metallic image for a temple.

Cambodia's colonial history as well as its recent past have made research challenging. It is unclear how Indic religions spread in Southeast Asia. Instead of considering this as a colonisation, intellectual or cultural, or viewing the region as a passive recipient of 'influence' from India, many scholars favour the understanding that interaction between the two regions resulted in Cambodian rulers adopting and selectively adapting 'Hinduism' while building prestige temples with carvings of 'Hindu' stories from Indian epics in their huge city states such as Angkor, which were global marketplaces, attracting traders, scholars, and priests, especially from India and China. The sites here display *Vaishnava* and *Shaiva* 'influence', and a less prominent Buddhist legacy than neighbouring

regions. The longest Sanskrit inscription in the world on the subject of the *Anantashayi* Vishnu reclining on the ocean of milk on Shesha is found in Cambodia. The inscription was commissioned by Queen Kulaprabhavati, principal spouse of Sri Jayavarman, in the 6th century CE. Long inscriptions were found not only in Pre Rup, but also in Sdok Kok Thom; the latter inscription is in Sanskrit and Khmer, and presents a genealogy of the Khmer kings. The speaker noted changes in the form of *Anantashayi* Vishnu here from the 7th to the 12th centuries CE, though these are difficult to map because many Cambodian artefacts are not available for study. Removal as well as rampant looting and destruction are a reality. For instance, photographs record looted art, which is fortunately now being returned, in the Latchford and Lindeman homes. A 10th-century Hayagriva sculpture from Sambor Prei Kuk, the body and head of which have been reunited after a century, is currently in the National Museum in Cambodia. Similarly, a Harihara body has been reunited with its head through an exchange with the Musee Guimet. Alongside attempts at return, restitution, and repatriation, damage and looting continue. The speaker showed images of an *Anantashayi* Vishnu panel from the Kbal Spean river where the head and torso of Vishnu, and Lakshmi's head were cut away by thieves in 2003 and are still at large. The panel was reconstructed in 2015.

Diverging from India, Cambodia has multiple carvings of *Anantashayi* Vishnu at single sites and especially along river beds. It is more common to find half-reclining images of this form in Cambodia; supine images are rare. Vishnu here often holds the lotus stalk emerging from his navel tightly. Early-7th-century images from Cambodia lack the Lakshmi figure, with a *rishi's* bearded head placed at Vishnu's feet in some panels. From the 10th century onwards, Lakshmi is invariably present. Subsidiary figures may emerge from the mouths of *makaras* carved on either side of the *Anantashayi* Vishnu. Ananta is a seven-headed snake in early Cambodian images. Vishnu's head is usually propped up by his hand in most sculptures. In Cambodia, there are many reverse-reclining Vishnus due to the care taken in adhering to directional conventions. Intriguingly, two *Anantashayi* images may sometimes be placed head-to-head in lintels in early Cambodian images and later Indian representations, seemingly turning them into *alankara* or decorative, symmetrical



motifs. However, the position of the hands in each figure is often distinct. Each Cambodian temple site has a unique style, for instance, the style at Koh Ker or Pre Rup. From the 11th century onwards, a crocodile was also sometimes found carved below the torso of Vishnu. Uniquely, in some Cambodian panels, a crocodile is visible above the head of Vishnu, aligning with a verse from the *Vishnu Purana* which mentions the presence of a *shishumara* (a dolphin-like crocodile) above Vishnu's head. From the late 11th century onwards, *Anantashayi* panels in Cambodia have an elaborate *makara*-like creature, seemingly creating a stylised bed below Vishnu. Below the *makara*, which has been identified by other scholars as a dragon or a *gajasimha*, a single-headed snake is sometimes visible. Churning panels are often present alongside.

Phnom Kulen, an early capital established by Jayavarman II along the river Siem Reap, is one of the oldest and most revered sites in Cambodia. There are many *Anantashayi* Vishnu images in the river. Other Cambodian rivers including the Kbal Spean (which is compared explicitly to the Ganga in inscriptions) have many such carvings as well as Shiva *lingas*, an association not seen in India. The Kbal Spean river flows over the carvings and is known as the river of the thousand *lingas*;

Suryavarman I and Udayadityavarman II were the patrons of the site. Cambodian inscriptions refer humorously to the jealousy of Uma which resulted from Shiva's close association with the Ganga. The Ganga is also described as coming from the foot of Vishnu.

Other deities share the motif of reclining with *Anantashayi* Vishnu, though only he reclines on a snake. Shiva reclines with his head on the lap of Parvati in Suruttupallai, Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. Whimsical stories seek to explain the reason why deities recline. The *Parinibbana Sutta* records that the Buddha reclines in *Parinirvana* between twin Sal trees with his head to the north, surrounded by disciples and devotees as seen in sculpted panels from many sites. One of the earliest panels of the *Parinirvana* (2nd century CE) is found in Bhamala (Pakistan). Across the globe, the imagery of the *Parinirvana* of the Buddha remains important and popular, as are his birth, his first sermon, and his victory over Mara. The Kulen Hills in Cambodia house a huge reclining Buddha in *Parinirvana*; there are many reclining Buddhas in Thailand, such as the Emerald Buddha. The snake, however, is not associated with this image but with the snake Muchalinda's hoods protecting the empty seat and Buddha *pada* or feet, as seen in the 2nd century BCE panel at Pauni in Maharashtra. Later images depict Muchalinda over the serene seated Buddha. The latter became popular in Cambodia in the Baphuon period (mid-11th century CE). Vishnu *Anantasana*, that is seated on the snake, is also a popular image, seen in its magnificence at Badami with a *prayoga chakra* (in the vertical position, or ready to use) which is also common in Cambodia. Parshvanatha, the twenty-third Tirthankara in the Jain tradition, is also protected by the hoods of a snake while in a standing position (as seen in a 2nd-century-CE stone head from Mathura). According to John Cort, an asymmetric reclining image of the Jina, who is usually portrayed in an iconic form to communicate dispassion, would be aesthetically inappropriate in the Jain tradition. Reclining figures of mothers with infants are seen in the Indian subcontinent; all reclining figures bring protection to mind but in *Anantashayi* Vishnu and the *Parinirvana*, the theme of dissolution is also very important. In the 1st-century-CE depiction at Sanchi, Maya reclines as she dreams of an elephant entering her womb after giving birth to Siddhartha.

After the 10th century, it is common to find sculptures of Devaki with Krishna, where the serpent Adishesha's hoods protect mother and child. There are also depictions of Rama and Narasimha reclining. All these images are related and ancillary to the reclining Vishnu. The image of *Anantashayi* Vishnu simultaneously embodies the highest auspiciousness, impermanence, and paradox. These themes are mirrored in a common Hindu household ritual in South India: the creation of *kolams*. Today, an ancient or medieval *Anantashayi* Vishnu can be recreated using a 3D printer, echoing Vishnu's 're-creation' of the cosmos as well as the 'recreation' and the *lila* of Vishnu that occurs through Brahma and is embodied in his reclining form. – ***J.K.***

Dr. Vasudha Narayanan speaks during 'Cosmos and Eternity, Creation, Dissolution, and 'Re-Creation': Vishnu on Ananta'

CRITICISM & THEORY

Apnavi Makanji | Untitled - Significant Other | 2018 | Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery

JPM's Criticism & Theory offerings include: (1) a Certificate course in Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) an ongoing series of public seminars and lectures in Indian Intellectual Traditions; and (3) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory

Prayer Winds and Profit: Indian Ocean Trade (1st–15thc)

PAST PROGRAMMES

Money Talks, Money Acts: Human Choices Reflected in Fragments of Gold

February 24th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Rebecca Darley (Senior Research Fellow at the Koç University Center for Anatolian Studies, ANAMED, in Istanbul)

One of the provocations of this lecture is to see coins — shiny, valuable, durable objects — as more than mere currency, to recognise them not just for their utility, but also as objects of desire, 'charismatic objects', i.e., objects that have been ascribed social value and not just economic value.

While coins moved from the West to the East, perishables, like spices, moved from the East to the West. South Asia, thus, has a massive collection of coins, from 4,000 Roman gold (*aureus*) and silver (*dinarai*) coins which came to India before the 3rd century CE, to 400 Byzantine gold coins (*solidus*) and 8–10,000 Byzantine copper coins which came to India between the 4th–7th centuries CE.

Interestingly, Roman coins have rarely been found in North India, since this trade was not conducted by land, but sea. But coins have not even been found on the coast. They were found slightly inland, since that is where both wealth and power were located. Also, to note, there is no evidence of these coins having been used for more than 80–100 years after their arrival. *Aureus* has had the widest distribution in peninsular India, followed by silver, and then, the Byzantine coins.

Dr. Darley looked at two sites — one in Telangana and the other in Tamil Nadu.

Around a third of these Byzantine gold coins were imitations made within South India. Around the same proportion were pierced for use as pendants. Many carried scratch marks that looked intentionally made — these marks were probably not made to test the purity of the gold, since as much as nine such slashes have been found on a single coin, while one would have done the job. Late Roman and Byzantine copper coins, however, have been found in hordes around rivers in South India — but they are neither imitated, nor pierced.

In the 1st century CE, we see the beginning of gold coins arriving in India. In the first half of the first millennium CE, these Roman coins were considered 'charismatic objects'. Holes were punched into them to, presumably, use them as part of necklaces. Roman coins stopped reaching India around the 3rd century CE.

Selection of solidi (obverse images only) from the Government Museum collection, Chennai, and the Akki Alur hoard, Karnataka, showing characteristic double piercings

Around the 4th century CE, Byzantine coins started reaching India. Under the 5th-century Theodosius II and 6th-century Justinian I, we see the last hurrah of Byzantine coins in South Asia. After the 7th century, when the Umayyads took over much of Byzantine territory, the latter lost access to the Red Sea, and thus, South Asia.

Dr. Rebecca Darley speaks during 'Money Talks, Money Acts: Human Choices Reflected in Fragments of Gold'

In the Byzantium imagination, too, India gets further and further away. By the 5th century, India, in their imagination, could have been anywhere south of the Red Sea. From the 7th century onwards, there was no direct contact. As trade diminished, then disappeared, these coins, too, disappeared. And as these coins disappeared, so did their charisma.

In the second half of the first millennium CE, given the grand Chola temples of Thanjavur and the Pallava temple at Mahabalipuram, and the Nataraja, there were local objects possessing this 'charisma', and so, it could be argued, we did not need the exotic 'West'. We can also read how in the first half of the first millennium, the Yavanas were seen as exotic in Tamil poems. We can also see how, later, over the first millennium, when Tamil Nadu got access to Southeast Asian trade, and also local agricultural wealth, the foreign and the exotic as a way to distinguish the rich and powerful became irrelevant. **– *P.P.***

Baskets of Betelnuts and Bottles of Sugar: The Cairo Geniza and Transregional Exchange between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean

March 4th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Roxani Eleni Margariti (Associate Professor at Emory University's Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies)

A depository of discarded written material accumulated over a period of 1,000 years was found from the *geniza* (a storage room) of the Ben Ezra synagogue of a Jewish community in Old Cairo (Fustat). These manuscripts came to be known as the Cairo Geniza papers and though they were known locally for centuries, they only came to the attention of Western scholarship in the 1890s. Their discovery has been extremely critical to the understanding of how deeply the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean economies were connected between the 10th and 13th centuries. The world that these documents help unravel existed at an intersection of increased trade relations between the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa and Syria, the Cholas in South India, and the Song Dynasty in China post the 10th century.

The entire Geniza corpus amounts to around 4,00,000 documents, amongst which 10–15% provide a record of daily life, professional dealings, and communal affairs of the Jewish community of Egypt and the Mediterranean. But the ones that Dr. Roxani concentrated on in her lecture resulted from the commercial activities of the Jewish merchants and traders in Cairo between the 11th and 13th centuries, with trade networks ranging from Spain to Sumatra. They paint a vivid picture of the social and economic history of the entire Islamic and Jewish world during that period, and show how fluid and interconnected the medieval commercial economy was.

Thanks to the tremendous efforts of S.D. Goitein and of Mordechai Friedman later, more than 500 documents related to the subject of the larger Indian Ocean world have been arranged in separate volumes called the *India Book*. Volumes 1–5 are centred on individual traders (mentioned below) and their networks, while volumes 6 and 7 will be a compilation of documents from various miscellaneous traders.

1st volume – Joseph ibn Albedi, 11th century
2nd volume – Madmun bin Jafed, 11th century, Yemeni Jewish leader
3rd volume – Abraham bin Yiju, a trader who spent a long time living in the Malabar
4th volume – Halfon B. Nathaniel, 12th century, North Africa

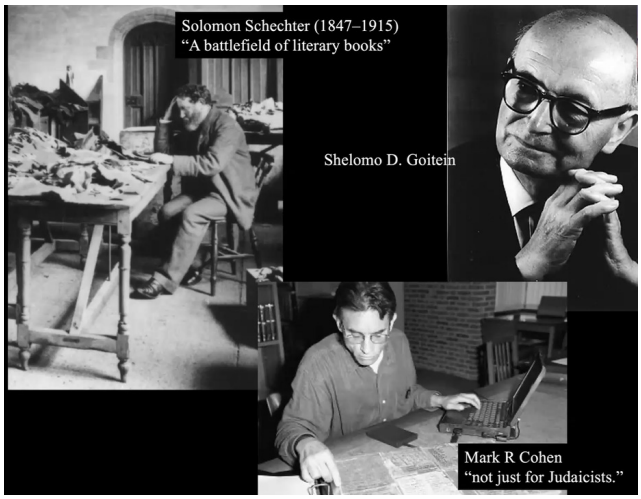
5th volume – Abn Zikri Hokohen, 12th century, Jewish trader from Cairo

While the languages used in these documents range from Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic to even a few traces of Southasian languages, the principal language in which most of the documents are written in is Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in the Hebrew script), and many were also written by professional scribes on behalf of traders and travellers.

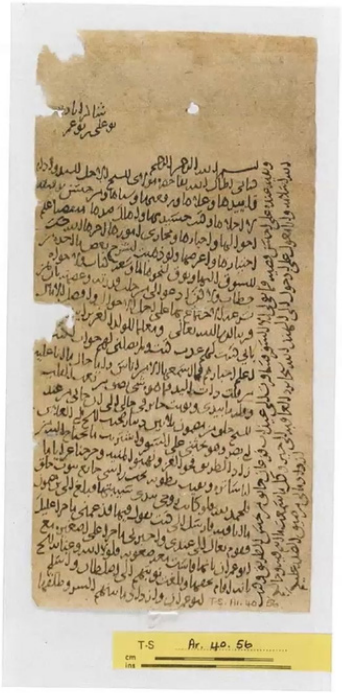
By the virtue of their discovery, we now know names of not just places but also of people like traders, associates, ship owners and of ships, along with an entire terminology that was used for business relationships, partnership contracts, credit arrangements, maritime insurances, obligations, and privileges widely used then. These documents displayed thriving Jewish communities across the Islamic world and unfolded the geographic extent to which the medieval world and the different places within it were interconnected through trade.

To demonstrate this, Dr. Roxani displayed a letter written in Arabic by a businessman named Abu Ali bin Abu Omar to his family, talking about his journey from Cairo to Aden via Miniya and the Aydhab port, and his anxieties regarding an arduous journey ahead to Al Hind (India). He also talks about his nephew's safe arrival at Al Jawa (Java, Indonesia) in his 2nd letter, which gives us a glimpse into the continuous flow of people across continents. However, several shipwreck documents from the Geniza have been deeply descriptive of the perils these travels involved, and give intimate glimpses of the tragedies that ensued.

Through many of these letters, we also see how geopolitics in these places often intersected with the travels and lives of ordinary Indian Ocean traders. Merchant routes were deeply shaped by local polities and port authorities. With shifting dynasties and political instability, certain ports and routes became safe or unsafe, custom duties were constantly negotiated, and merchants needed protection from local rulers against threat of piracy. The papers also shed light on how smaller local polities between Arabia and the Horn of Africa, like Dahlak, a small island Sultanate, controlled the route, collected taxes,



and extracted the maximum benefit out of trade, something we would not have otherwise clearly understood. Prosperous trade depended heavily on stable governments and access to politically secure ports, while wars, changing tax regimes, or unsafe maritime routes delayed voyages and disrupted entire commercial networks across the Indian Ocean.



10. II, 64. TS Arabic 40, f. 56. Letter from Abū ʿAlī b. Bū ʿUmar to his Family before Travel to India.

The papers give particularly rich insight into the ports of India along the Gujarat, Konkan and Malabar coasts which emerged as major commercial centres between the 11th and 13th centuries. Ports such as Khambayat (Khambhat), Al-Qass (Kutch), Baruj (Bharuch), Tana (Thane), Sindabur (Goa), Manjarur (Mangalore), and Kullum (Kollam) find mention in the papers, and had become cosmopolitan urban centres where Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu merchants interacted regularly. Especially on the southern Malabar Coast, the Jewish diaspora was deeply integrated into society, forming relationships with local Hindu rulers and other Arab merchants while maintaining distinct religious and cultural traditions. They constructed synagogues and Jewish quarters to stay on their sojourns, and enjoyed privileges and political patronage from

Dr. Roxani Eleni Margariti speaks during 'Baskets of Betelnuts and Bottles of Sugar: The Cairo Geniza and Transregional Exchange between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean'

local Indian rulers who recognised the economic importance of a sustained Indian Ocean trade.

By citing the case study of the Jewish businessman Abraham bin Yiju, to whom Volume 3 of *India Book* is dedicated, Dr. Roxani talked about how Jewish merchants established businesses and factories in India, owned individual native slaves, and sometimes also married them, started a family, and settled for a certain time, particularly in Southern India, while taking sojourns to places like Aden, Yemen, and more. For instance, Abraham married his Tulu slave, Ashu, and established a brass/ bronze manufacturing factory in Malabar while trading with Cairo and Aden.

The letters also give a comprehensive understanding of the goods that were shipped from Egypt and those that were exported from South Asia. High value commodities like pepper, aromatics, dyes, indigo, medicinal herbs, betel nut, and textiles like Indian cotton and silk were exported in large quantities from the ports of Malabar and Gujarat. Fragments of textiles found in Fustat have been identified as coming from Gujarat between the 11th and 13th centuries. The papers also provide rich terminology for various Indian textile types and qualities.

Timber, brass and bronze vessels, pearls, cowrie shells, beads, and Chinese porcelain were other major components of this trade. The papers also show the circulation of African ivory, Yemenite stoneware, copper, tin, medicine, sugar, raisins, olive oil, and gold and silver coins towards India and South Asia. We get ample evidence of the circulation of Fatimid and Yemeni dinars and their penetration into Kerela and interior parts of Gujarat in exchange for Indian products. It is unclear though whether these were used as currency or as bullion. Sugar production comes across as a major industry in Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt, with evidence of several sugar-producing kitchen and plants (*matbakh*) and of huge capital being invested in sugar factories. Sugar was one of the major products exported by the Geniza subjects.

The papers have been fascinating in demonstrating the idea of a corrupting sea. With the sea, and trade on it, came new objects and ideas. Some were accepted enthusiastically and some were met with anxiety and doubts. The Geniza was not a royal archive. It survived accidentally because Jewish tradition discouraged throwing away documents containing God's name out of respect. They had to be stored in the *geniza* and later ritually disposed. Their accidental preservation helped historians understand the complexity of medieval commercial systems. It helped pioneer history from below, reconstructing society through ordinary voices instead of just the elite ones. **– *P.S.***

Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast

March 10th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Sebastian R. Prange (An Associate Professor of South Asian History at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada)

Since antiquity, India has been a major trade centre in the Indian Ocean world. It has always had the advantage of being centrally located, of being a major population centre and hence an immense market, a producer of numerous goods and most importantly, spices. The numerous ports on its long coastline have welcomed traders from the Roman empire, East Africa, Persia, Southeast Asia, and China. With this background, Dr. Sebastian Prange in his lecture argues that it was the

monsoon winds and the merchants who brought Islam to the coastlines of the Indian Ocean. The traders and their economic and commercial interests fashioned the development and rise of Islam in maritime Asia. Islamic faith thus came with trade and developed together in Southeast Asia. This puts merchants at the forefront and exemplifies their importance as historical agents in the evolutionary history of the Malabar Coast. Dr. Prange believes that mercantile history has largely been ignored by historians due to lack of first-hand source material, except the Geniza Documents and a few other sources. Merchants, not being elites or highly educated, have not been studied well by historians though they have been instrumental to numerous major developments in the world.

Black pepper came to be known as the King of Spices and was the most lucrative trade item due to its immense demand across West Asia and Europe. The pepper trade goes far back to antiquity with the Roman empire trading gold and silver bullions for pepper. It had become an item of luxury that was in demand in every society. What made pepper the most important ingredient of the Indian spice trade was the ease to store and transport it and its high value compared to its weight. Up until the 15th century, the Malabar Coast was the only major producer of black pepper in the world. It is this pepper trade that gave the ports of Malabar their reputation.

1. The Port

The port of Calicut came into prominence in the 14th century, and in a matter of a few decades became the largest and most prosperous pepper port on the Malabar Coast. A major reason for Calicut's claim to fame was the fair and orderly administration of the Zamorin rulers. The property rights of all traders were greatly protected by the Zamorins. These merchants were foreigners and outsiders with immense capital and wealth for trade, but with no local lobby to defend their rights or to fight for them. They were in a vulnerable position, usually at the mercy of the rulers of each port they traded with. At the Calicut port, the officials were just, no goods were stolen, and efforts were made to reunite goods with owners in case of a shipwreck. The Zamorins did not overly tax or sequester the possessions of the merchants, which made the Calicut port extremely conducive to trade.

Calicut during this time was a highly cosmopolitan city. People of various ethnicities, speaking different languages, dressing distinctly, all rubbed shoulders with each other in the marketplaces of these port cities. There were ships from East Africa, China, and the Middle East, all docked side by side in the bay, and the markets were flooded with numerous goods from all over the Indian Ocean. Amongst these groups, it was the Muslims who were a dominant force in the transoceanic pepper trade. Muslim merchant networks held autonomy and considerable political influence over the commercial affairs and administration of the city.

2. The Mosque

Trade was a social activity and not an individual occupation, heavily depending on networks, associations, personal and family reputations, etc. For the dominant Muslim community, the mosque was the nucleus of their society. To the visiting merchants, they gave food and shelter, security for their belongings, trade goods and money, a place to forge new connections and find existing ones, and a place to jumpstart their business activities. As the mosques were built for and by the merchants, Dr. Prange argues that their establishment through the years on the Malabar Coast can help chart the development of Islam, the shifting of the pepper trade, and the

waxing and waning importance of varied ports.

Since the mosques were privately financed by the merchants and not state endeavours, they were built as humble structures in the beginning, which then expanded with time. Their architecture echoed the design language of the vernacular Hindu temple design of the region as these merchants were trying to fit into the existing cultural and sacred landscape. Only royal palaces and religious structures were allowed to have red-tiled roofing structures, and so these mosques with multi-tiered red-tile sloping roofs and large superstructures flaunted their special privilege and social status along with a symbolic integration with the region's pre-existing religious traditions. Dr. Prange makes a compelling case for the contribution of very wealthy merchants in establishing a place for Islam on the Malabar Coast. The foundations of faith were placed by the profits of trade.

3. The Palace

The Malabar Coast during this time was divided into 3 main kingdoms: The Kolathiris in Mangalore, the Zamorins in Calicut and the Cochin Rajas in Kochi who were vassals of the Zamorins and under the influence of their growing political and military power. The Zamorins afforded protection and special privileges to the Muslim merchants as they were extremely integral to the fortunes of Calicut. Dr. Prange illustrates this by talking about an inscription made in granite on the prayer hall entrance of the Muchundipalli mosque in Calicut. The 1st half of the inscription is written in Arabic and talks about the merchant who financed the mosque. The 2nd half is written in Old Malayalam and talks about the Hindu Zamorin ruler offering an endowment in the form of rice. The plaque by two different donors of different religions, in two different languages on the eternal granite stone demonstrates the integration of Islam into the political and socio-cultural landscape of the region, and the high esteem that Muslim merchants were held in by the local Hindu rulers.

The Muslims controlled the pepper trade in Calicut, and so in the 16th century when the Portuguese arrived on the Malabar Coast, the Muslim populace became their particular target for as long as 80 years. A local scholar called Zayn-al-Din Malabari wrote an important text about the local Muslim community; in it, he explained how after years of war, they had become weak and powerless. He complained against the Muslim rulers of the Deccan, Yemen, Persia, and Egypt, who had not come to the assistance of the Muslims of Malabar, and sang praises of the Hindu ruler of Calicut who had become the protector and friend of the Muslims.

4. The Sea

Dr. Prange, in the last part of the lecture, talked about how the Indian Ocean and the commercial interconnectivity it facilitated also helped in establishing political, religious, social, and cultural networks between different continents. When, post the 16th century, the Portuguese laid claim to the Indian Ocean and considered Muslim networks as smugglers and pirates, the Muslim merchants began reconfiguring their trade networks. They shifted their trade to secondary ports, inland and coastal routes, and moved their market to Southeast Asia.

Sufi networks also developed during this period over Southeast Asia, as they were very active in trade as well, and Sufi scholars also travelled with merchants in ships, spreading their ideas and establishing shrines and places of worship. Thus with the exchange of goods, there was also an exchange of cultural practices, food, festivals, rituals, and scholarly ideas that took place. But he argues that this is a story of trade more than faith, as Muslims were more pragmatic than ideological and wanted to fit in with their host societies. He left us with the idea that the Indian Ocean port cities were more interconnected with each other and had more similarities than they did with the hinterlands. **– *P.S.***

Dr. Sebastian R. Prange speaks during 'Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast'

Small Things, Vast Oceans: Trade, Ecology, and the Making of the Early India–Africa World

March 17th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Akshay Sarathi (Assistant Professor of Archaeology at the American University of Sharjah)

This report brings together two interconnected themes explored by Professor Akshay Sarathi.

1. The circulation of beads between South Asia and East Africa.
2. The movement of plants and animals across the Indian Ocean world.

Rather than viewing these as separate processes, both reveal how communities on either side of the ocean participated in building complex systems of connectivity long before the arrival of European empires.

The history of connections between South Asia and East Africa has often been framed through the movement of merchants, empires, or large-scale commodities. Yet some of the strongest evidence for these interactions emerges from objects and organisms that appear ordinary at first glance, such as glass beads, carnelian stones, cattle, millets, and bananas.

Together, these materials reveal that the Indian Ocean was not merely a space of exchange but a zone where societies actively reshaped economies, landscapes, technologies, and social worlds. The Indian Ocean was one of the most active zones of exchange in the premodern world. Seasonal monsoon winds created predictable maritime routes which allowed people to travel between South Asia, Arabia, and East Africa with remarkable regularity.

Trade across this region did not suddenly emerge with large empires or religious expansion. Archaeological evidence increasingly suggests that long-distance exchange developed gradually through repeated interactions among coastal communities. These networks linked local economies into wider systems while preserving regional diversity, and most importantly, this history requires moving beyond older narratives that portrayed African societies as passive recipients of foreign goods. Instead, archaeological evidence shows these communities making deliberate decisions about what they chose to

Dr. Akshay Sarathi speaks during 'Small Things, Vast Oceans: Trade, Ecology, and the Making of the Early India–Africa World'

import, how they modified incoming technologies, and how they integrated foreign materials into existing cultural systems.

Glass beads represent one of the clearest archaeological indicators of early Indian Ocean exchange because they survived well, appeared in large quantities, and can be chemically traced to production centres.

Glass production in South Asia created objects uniquely suited for maritime trade.

Beads were lightweight, portable, easy to transport in bulk, and could function across different scales of exchange. Chemical analysis of these beads now allows researchers to identify where these beads originated by examining the elemental signatures preserved within the glass.

Research at sites such as Unguja Ukuu on Zanzibar demonstrates the scale of these exchanges.

Excavations reveal thousands of imported glass beads dating roughly between the 6th and 11th centuries CE. Chemical analysis shows that most of them originated from South India, while smaller numbers came from North India and the Middle East.

At Unguja Ukuu, imported beads existed alongside far larger quantities of locally produced shell beads. Rather than replacing existing traditions, imported materials became incorporated into older systems of ornamentation

and exchange.

Evidence of attempted glass recycling at the site further complicates simplistic models of trade. Archaeologists discovered partially melted beads that suggest local communities understood some aspects of glass production but lacked access to the specialised furnace technologies necessary for large-scale manufacture.

If glass beads reveal networks of exchange, carnelian beads reveal technological specialisation.

Carnelian had circulated across the Indian Ocean for centuries, but evidence increasingly suggests that Southasian producers dominated long-distance distribution networks. Archaeological studies indicate that many carnelian beads found along the East African coast originated from production zones in present-day Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Southasian bead makers developed sophisticated drilling technologies using diamond-tipped tools that allowed them to produce highly standardised beads with lower rates of breakage. Heat treatment techniques further enhanced the bright red appearance.

What emerges from these findings is not simply evidence of commerce but of technological concentration and production expertise that itself became part of the economic geography of the Indian Ocean.

Sites in the African interior reveal how these networks extended far beyond coastal settlements, and how carnelian beads moved inland through trade routes linking coastal communities with expanding political centres associated with gold production and regional commerce.

These movements remind us that Indian Ocean trade was never exclusively maritime, and that coastal exchange depended upon extensive inland systems which connected ports to wider political and economic landscapes.

One of the most important conclusions emerging from this lecture is that participation in Indian Ocean trade varied significantly across communities, that sites such as Chibuene in present-day Mozambique reveal exchange systems which differ from those found in Zanzibar.

Meanwhile, settlements such as Tumbe on Pemba Island show yet another pattern. Here, imported ceramics and glass containers appeared alongside extensive evidence for local shell bead production, but relatively limited evidence for imported glass bead consumption. These differences matter because they challenge the idea of a single, uniform Indian Ocean culture. Communities participated differently depending on local priorities, existing industries, social preferences, and regional political structures.

Trade networks moved not only objects but also transported biotics.

The movement of plants and animals across the Indian Ocean transformed landscapes, food systems, labour practices, and ecological relationships. These transfers were sometimes intentional and sometimes accidental, but their long-term consequences were profound. One of the clearest examples comes from cattle.

Genetic evidence suggests that humped cattle originating in South Asia were introduced into East Africa, where they were selectively bred with local cattle populations. Rather than replacing existing herds, African pastoralists created hybrids that combined drought tolerance with resistance to local disease environments, which says communities were not simply adopting foreign animals but were reshaping them.

Similar processes appear in plant histories: several crops central to Southasian agriculture

today, including sorghum, pearl millet, and finger millet originated in Africa before spreading eastward. These crops became particularly important during periods of climatic instability because many were better adapted to semi-arid conditions than existing staples.

Today these crops are often treated as indigenous components of regional cuisines and identities despite their transregional histories. Bananas provide perhaps the most dramatic example of long-distance ecological exchange. Originating in Southeast Asia, bananas spread westward through networks associated with Austronesian maritime movement. These populations moved across the Indian Ocean, stopping in South Asia before eventually reaching Madagascar and East Africa. Bananas require human intervention for propagation, and so their movement serves as direct evidence of repeated human transport.

As plants moved, they entered existing systems of labour, ritual, cuisine, and identity, and this process produced new cultural worlds rather than simply reproducing older ones elsewhere. At the same time, not all species movement was intentional. Rats and mice, for example, spread through expanding maritime networks, transforming ecosystems across the Indian Ocean basin. These animals followed ships, ports, storage systems, and settlements. Their movement reminds us that exchange networks generate consequences beyond human intention.

Early India–Africa interactions cannot be reduced to simple models of trade between distant civilisations. What emerges instead is a picture of constant negotiation involving technology, ecology, consumption, mobility, and cultural adaptation.

Glass beads and carnelian stones reveal complex networks of production and exchange, but they also reveal consumer choice and local agency. Plants and animals demonstrate that trade altered environments as much as economies. **– *S.T.K.***

China's Maritime Outreach, Inter-Group Exchanges, and Connections with Medieval Kerala

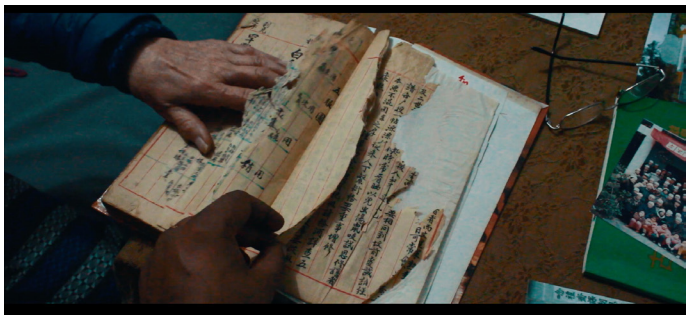
April 7th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Joe Thomas Karackattu (Professor with the Humanities and Social Sciences Department at IIT Madras)

The lecture series on the Indian Ocean trade could not have missed affording a special place to the historical connection between India and China, and Dr. Joe Thomas Karackattu's lecture brought out the long arch of interaction between the Kerala coast and a prominent medieval Chinese dynasty. His lecture moved between two scales: on the one hand, a grandiose state project represented by the seven official maritime missions dispatched by the early Ming emperors to Southeast Asia, Ceylon, South India, and beyond; on the other, the human scale of interactions between those travelling, trading, learning, and settling in the wake of these missions.

China became a maritime nation during the Southern Song dynasty and evolved into a true naval power during the Ming dynasty. The third Ming emperor Yong Le (1403–24) dispatched six naval expeditions between 1405 and 1422 (1405–7, 1407–9, 1409–11, 1413–15, 1417–19, 1421–22), all led by the 'grand eunuch' Zheng He; a seventh took place between 1431–33 during Xuan Zong's reign. The first four of these expeditions focussed on expanding China's presence in the Indian Ocean; they called mainly at Southeast Asian ports, and none went further than Khozikode (Calicut). The fleets were of spectacular size, and ships carried numerous goods of which most were intended as presents for the rulers at the ports of call; articles such as silk, musk, and porcelain were traded by state as well as private actors, and the list of goods for trade increased with every mission. In fact, the last three voyages, which went as far as Hormuz, the Maldives, and the East African coast, seized on the lucrative trade of the Indian Ocean, and Chinese merchants not only traded their own goods, but also gradually imposed themselves as significant players by trading in commodities previously in the hands of Arabs, Indians, and other foreigners. The official missions stopped

after 1433, and trade between India and China is understood to have been conducted by private merchants from then onwards.

In its dealings with the various polities of South and Southeast Asia, China differentiated clearly between those that needed to be subdued through maritime military incursions or tribute embassies, and equals with whom commercial as well as political exchange could take place. Calicut under the Zamorins, the most important harbour in the Western Ocean by Chinese accounts, belonged to the latter category. Its strategic position, as an entrepot and meeting point of traders from all three continents, placed it on par with Malacca. The Chinese armadas, sailing from the port of Nanjing, all passed through it, with the first three ending there. Numerous return embassies are also recorded, with details of the Chinese court bestowing gifts and titles, and organising banquets and other festivities in honour of the Indian merchants and ambassadors. These embassies are described by Chinese sources as submitting tribute and acknowledging the emperor's suzerainty, whilst the emperor in return granted honours and titles to the local ruler. Two inscriptions, both commissioned by Yong Le, in Liujiagang (Jiangsu) and at Changle (Fujian province), of which only the latter survives, give details of the admiral's



Film still from Guli's Children

voyages to Ku Li (Calicut) as well as to eastern Africa among other sites.

With the embassies between the two countries, there travelled merchants, craftsmen, and ambassadors, some of whom chose to settle down once they reached their destination. Such a story is narrated in *Guli's Children*, a 2016 documentary by Dr. Karackattu where he goes in search of a Chinese family whose origins are in 14th-century Calicut. In the extracts screened during the lecture, the current patriarch of the family presented family genealogy books proving the connection, while also recalling memories of the distant land passed down through generations. Indeed, cultural memories of the Chinese also survive in Kerala, with the fishing nets donning the coast of cosmopolitan Kochi being a prime example of a heritage that is treasured over the ages. **– *C.B.***

Visible and Invisible Connections: History of Trade Between India and East Africa, 700–1500 CE

April 9th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Stephanie Wynne-Jones (Professor of African Archaeology at the University of York, UK)

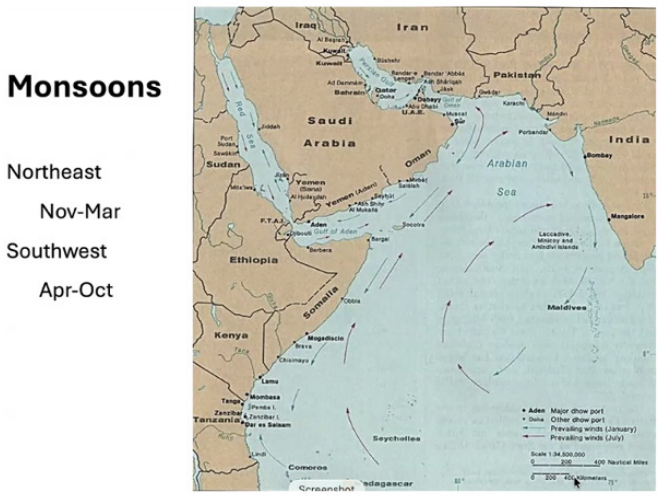
The East African (Swahili) coast remains an under-examined dimension of the Indian Ocean world. In this lecture, Dr. Stephanie Wynne-Jones traces its long-standing connections with the wider Indian Ocean region, particularly India, from 700–1500 CE, also demonstrating that these interactions shaped religion, architecture, culture, and technology far beyond the sphere of commerce.

Dr. Wynne-Jones opened by addressing the challenges of reconstructing connections. East Africa has few written sources prior to 1500 CE, although there existed a rich local tradition of oral historians and oral histories. Texts such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and the accounts of Arab geographers like al-Masudi (10th century) and Ibn Battuta (14th century), while valuable, are limited in scope. Archaeologists therefore rely largely on material remains to reconstruct the region's visible and invisible connections to the broader Indian Ocean world.

The Swahili coast extends from Somalia to Mozambique, encompassing Zanzibar, the Comoro Islands, and parts of northern

Madagascar. Between the 7th and 15th centuries, settlements developed along this coastline that shared a common history, the Kiswahili language, Islamic faith, and a distinctive material culture.

Although the coastal zone developed a distinct identity, it remained closely tied to the African interior through kinship ties and trade. Coastal merchants exchanged locally produced iron, shell beads, and imports for inland goods – ivory, hardwoods, animal products, minerals, and enslaved people – exported across the Indian Ocean.



A critical enabler was the Indian Ocean monsoon system, whose seasonal winds facilitated annual trading voyages between East Africa, Arabia, the Persian Gulf, India, and beyond.

Historiography of Swahili Sites

Early 20th century colonial scholars interpreted Swahili sites as foreign creations, arguing that Swahili stone towns, with their stone palaces, mosques, tombs, and houses had been founded by Arab or Persian settlers. This was a view based on Islamic-style architecture, imported goods, and oral traditions linking elite families to Persia and southern Arabia.

From the 1980s, scholarship challenged this orthodoxy on linguistic and architectural grounds. Kiswahili was shown to be a Bantu language with African origins, while claims of Persian ancestry were reinterpreted as expressions of prestige rather than evidence of migration.

Particularly significant were archaeologist Mark Horton's excavations at Shanga in the Lamu archipelago in the 1980s. Beneath a 14th-century stone mosque, Horton uncovered earlier structures extending back to an 8th-century wattle-and-daub mosque at the centre of an African settlement. Sherds of early-Tana-tradition ceramics were also recovered from layers dated up to the first millennium, and are also present across the African interior.

These findings confirmed that Swahili settlements developed *in situ*, evolving organically into the stone towns of the second millennium, the product of continuous African development and not foreign colonisation. A reinterpretation that now constitutes the prevailing framework for Swahili archaeology and history.

Indian Ocean Trade and the Swahili Coast

Material evidence, imported ceramics, glass vessels, and beads attest to these connections from the 6th century onwards. Swahili engagement with the wider Indian Ocean world broadened and intensified during the second millennium, with growing prosperity and deepening influence on religion, architecture, and culture.

Islam spread gradually along the coast between the 8th and 10th centuries, as evidenced by the early wattle-and-daub mosque dated to 740 CE at Shanga. Conversion offered access to shared commercial and legal frameworks, and protection within the Muslim trading networks. Islam became deeply rooted to the Swahili coast.

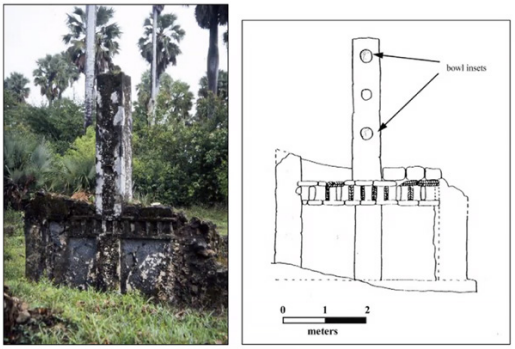
From the 11th-century, Swahili architecture incorporated elements of Islamic design, adapted to local traditions of construction and materials (coral stone, limestone, and hardwoods). The earliest 11th century stone mosques featured covered prayer halls with pillars; the courtyard mosque and the minaret features of the Middle East never entered the Swahili repertoire, whereas the pillar tombs were only seen here.

By the 14th century, prosperous merchant elites commissioned grand stone houses to impress visiting traders and conduct private commerce. Growing emphasis on privacy and gender segregation shaped interiors, with male public spaces yielding to more private female quarters deeper within the house. Women now became more secluded within domestic spaces. Whether this reflected maritime influences or broader Islamic norms remains an open question.

Imported goods served as visible markers of wealth and overseas connectivity for inhabitants of the Stone towns. Glazed pottery adorned the tombs, vaults, and mihrabs of mosques.

Bowl Insets on Mosque
Kichokochwe, Pemba Island

Bowl Insets on Pillar Tomb
Ras Mkumbuu, Pemba Island



Smaller niches in elite houses displayed glass and ceramics from the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and China; larger niches housed handwritten *Qurans*, while textiles adorned the walls.

House interiors
Lamu Island
18th century

Swahili towns were not simply entrepots; the inhabitants were engaged in securing food (fishing and farming), and evidence shows they also engaged in shell bead-making, iron smelting, pottery, fishing, and marine resource exploitation for the production of local goods. Imported goods did increase over the years but material evidence points in a small proportion (4-5%) to the local production, showing the Swahili applied thoughtful engagement.

India–East Africa Connections

The most compelling material evidence of this connection comes from glass beads on the coast. These Southasian glass beads circulated deep into the African interior, while carnelian (semi-precious stone) beads from Gujarat have been recovered at several Swahili sites. Chemical analysis of glass beads at Unguja Ukuu (7th to 11th centuries) suggest production from southern India or Sri Lanka, suggesting perhaps direct connections. Later glass beads (12th to 15th centuries) found in Kilwa Kisiwani, Songo Mnara, Lamu, etc. are from northern or central India, which may indicate direct contact or transit via the Persian Gulf or Red Sea.

There is also evidence of 'technology transfer', implying perhaps movement of Indian craftsmen to East Africa or from Swahili visitors to India.
The following examples reveal this:

a) At Songo Mnara, there was production of aragonite (large clam shell) beads, which were drilled using techniques associated with Gujarati craftsmen.
b) Certain Swahili earthenware, red burnished bowls, found in the 8th century on coastal sites, reflect Southasian stylistic influences.
c) A bronze lion recovered at Shanga depicts

an African lion but is cast from melted Chinese coinage, and is reminiscent of the Deccani style using Indian lost-wax metalworking techniques.

Several Swahili sites adopted coinage from the 8th century, an Indian Ocean influence especially from the Islamic world. Minting of gold and silver coins for use in foreign trade conformed to shared international weights. Kilwa Kisiwani also produced copper alloy coins for domestic use, whose styles reveal early connections to Sind, subsequently adapted to local preferences.

Indian cotton textiles were most likely traded along the Swahili coast prior to the 15th century but have not survive archaeologically in tropical environments. However, one 11th-century Indian piece identifiable through its indigo dye and z-spun attests to their presence. Spindle whorls found at Shanga (10th to 14th centuries), provides evidence of local production, attributed perhaps to Indian artisans, another 'technology transfer'. By the 14th century, imported Indian cottons, admired for their vibrant colours, were in high demand on the coast and in the interiors, as they replaced bark clothes and skins. Cotton was the major commodity exchanged for ivory and gold.

Recent DNA analysis of medieval Swahili burials reveals mixed African, Persian, and Southasian ancestry among Swahili populations, underscoring centuries of migration, intermarriage, and cross-cultural exchange.

Dr. Stephanie Wynne-Jones speaks during 'Visible and Invisible Connections: History of Trade Between India and East Africa, 700–1500 CE'

Currently, there is insufficient evidence to detail the complex relationship between India and East Africa, but further research may shed more light in the future.

Conclusion

The Swahili coast emerged as a dynamic African maritime civilisation. Locally rooted yet fully integrated into the commercial and cultural networks of the Indian Ocean world, representing one of the most consequential periods in African history. The Portuguese arrival from 1498 disrupted Indian Ocean trade routes, precipitating the decline of many Swahili towns and prompting the retreat of its inhabitants into the hinterlands. Swahili culture revived under Omani rule in the 18th century, albeit in a transformed form, but its legacy today endures in Zanzibar, Mombasa, and Lamu. **– *D.C.***

China and the Indian Ocean World from the Mongol Empire to the Great Ming State

April 14th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Sean Cronan (Assistant Professor in the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia)

For our penultimate lecture in the Indian Ocean Trade course, we went the furthest east to China and its rapid emergence as a major naval power in the Indian Ocean in the 15th century, thanks to the voyages of Admiral Zheng He (1405-1433). Professor Cronan gave an engrossing lecture on the context behind this shift, going back to the emergence of the Mongols as the largest empire in Eurasia under Genghis Khan in 1206 which, despite being land based, had consequences for the maritime world.

The first section covered the period of Mongol emergence, consolidation, and splits in the 13th century. The Mongol empire was based on aristocratic privilege and closeness with the Great Qaan rather than a centralised bureaucracy, and succession struggles after the death of the Grand Qaan Mongke in 1259 led to its split into four separate Mongol ruled states: the Yuan empire

Dr. Sean Cronan speaks during 'China and the Indian Ocean World from the Mongol Empire to the Great Ming State'

(1271-1368) in China, the Chagatai khanate in Central Asia, the Golden Horde in Russia and eastern Europe, and the Ilkhanate in Persia. Chagatai (d. 1242), the second son of Genghis Qaan, controlled the 'Silk Road' cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, and the land route from China to western Asia. His son, Qaidu (d. 1303) was a rival to Qubilai (d. 1294), who founded the Yuan empire in 1271, hence the Yuan lost access to central Asian trade routes, and more importantly, to their allies, the Ilkhans (1256-1335) of Persia. After the Yuan conquest of the southern Song dynasty in 1279, the Mongols gained control of the important southern Chinese ports of Hangzhou, Quanzhou, and Guangzhou, which had strong Indian Ocean links. This led to new diplomatic overtures to maritime southeast Asian states and Yuan court investment in state sponsored trade, building ships, and leasing them to merchants.

The second section covered the links of Yuan China with the Indian Ocean. There had been extensive Sino-Indian maritime trade far back before the Yuan conquest of south China with Chinese coins and porcelain sherds found in Tamil Nadu in the 11th and 12th centuries, but this trade was largely in the hands of South Indians, Persians and Arabs. This is backed by Song dynasty textual evidence. Indian exports (including transhipment from further west and Sri Lanka) included pearls, gemstones, coral, ivory, textiles, sappanwood, and frankincense, whilst Chinese exports included porcelain, silk, and coins (specie). This trade led to the establishment of large Muslim (and some Tamil) diasporas in Quanzhou and Guangzhou. A key figure was Pu Shougeng (d. 1296), a member of the Pu (possibly transliteration of Abu) clan of Arab Muslim merchants who commanded a massive naval and mercantile fleet for the Song court, and transferred their loyalties to the Yuan conquerors in 1276. Pu was placed in charge of regulating maritime trade and shipbuilding, expertise that the land-based Mongols lacked. He repeatedly championed new diplomatic missions to southeast Asia and further. The 1280s-1290s saw the Yuan court sending several official missions to the Pandya dynasty in the Tamil region. Yang Tingbi (fl. 1270s-1280s) was a key figure who served as an envoy to the Pandya kingdom and convinced them to begin relations with the Yuan court. At the same time, the Yuan empire launched military campaigns against Champa (central Vietnam) and Java, both of which ended in disaster!

The final section of the lecture covered the emergence of the Ming dynasty in 1368 after a period of anti-Yuan agrarian and millenarian rebellions across China. Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398), an orphaned commoner, emerged as a key figure, defeating other warlords and establishing the Ming dynasty in 1368 with the aim to "restore the old nation of our Han people". Whilst the Mongols were driven north, the Ming dynasty emerged in a Chinggisid and Persianate Asia, and hence were anxious to receive recognition from neighbouring states. There were overtures to southeast Asian polities in the late 14th century, many of which were integrated into a Sinitic 'tributary system' with diplomatic missions classified as tributary missions recognising Ming suzerainty and ritualised gift exchange. At the same time, private maritime trade was banned in 1371, due to fears of collusion with external forces. However, it is with the emergence of Zhu Yuanzhang's fourth son, Zhu Di, who usurped power from the second Ming emperor Zhu Yunwen and crowned himself as the Yongle emperor (r. 1399-1424), that we see a turbo-charging of China's maritime engagement. Under his directive, Zheng He, a eunuch and a descendant of Bukharan Muslims in Yunnan, was given charge of an enormous fleet of ships that made seven voyages in the Indian Ocean, visiting key polities and ports to establish tributary relations with Ming China and encourage trade hit by the Ming ban. The first voyage included 60 'treasure ships', the largest ships that the world had ever seen at the time, amongst a total of over 250 ships, carrying over 27,000 people, 26,000 of whom were soldiers! The first three voyages called at key ports in southeast Asia and terminated in Calicut on the Malabar coast,

highlighting the importance of the pepper trade. The fourth voyage terminated at Hormuz, whilst the last three voyages terminated in the Swahili ports of east Africa. Whilst the shipbuilding and trade stimulated the Chinese economy, the real purpose of the voyages was strategic, to establish Ming dominance in the Indian Ocean region, ensuring friendly tribute-based relations with key ports. The return voyages carried key officials, including royalty from coastal Indian Ocean kingdoms, who exchanged gifts with the Ming emperor. There were also attempts at encouraging the growth of newer, more pliant ports in the Indian Ocean, for example Cochin at the expense of Calicut, and Melaka at the expense of Javanese ports; the capture of a local rulers and 'pirates' (often overseas Chinese who were outside Ming state influence); and intervention in succession struggles. The tributes from the Indian Ocean countries, especially exotic animals (like a giraffe gifted by Bengal's rulers), served to glorify the Ming dynasty and confirm it had the 'Mandate of Heaven', and thus a central position in the world. The missions petered out after Zhu

Di died in 1424, due to gripes about the expense, with the last mission after the customary funerary period launching in 1431.

The lecture illuminated an extraordinary period in Indian Ocean history, that highlighted the role of Chinese state intervention in the region that began in the 13th century, with the fragmentation of the Mongol empire and blocking of land-based trade routes, and culminated in the voyages of Zheng He that led to Ming 'gunboat diplomacy' much before the 15th-century European voyages and subsequent conquests in the region. – ***A.M.***

The Odyssey of an Indian Merchant from Arikamedu to Alexandria in Roman Times

April 22nd, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Steven E. Sidebotham (Professor Emeritus from the History Department at the University of Delaware, USA)

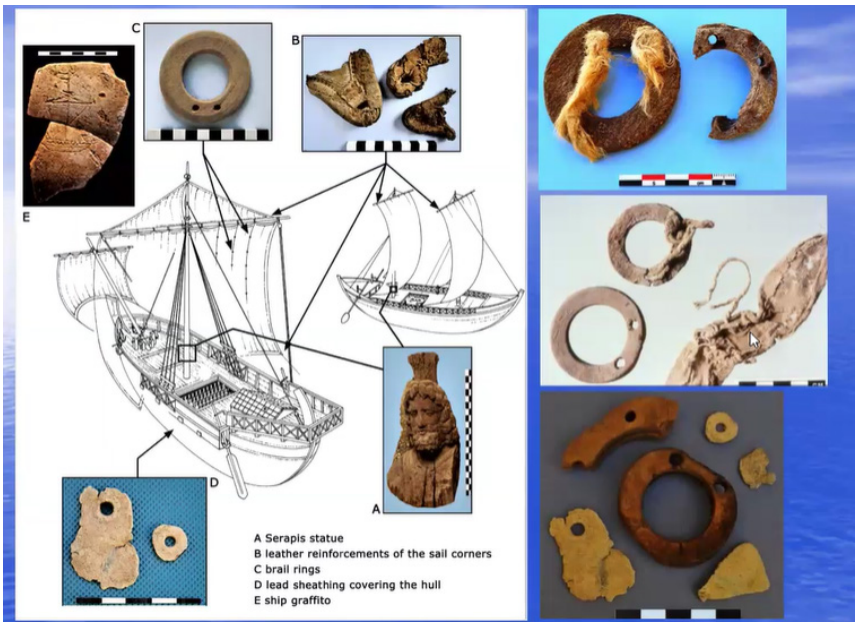
Dr. Sidebotham traced the journey of an imaginary merchant, Ravi, during the Roman period. Beginning at Arikamedu (ancient Poduke), Ravi would have taken the land route to Pattanam (likely ancient Muziris), and then taken the ship to southern Arabia (Qana in southern Yemen) up the Red Sea where the merchant would have ended his sea journey at Berenike. Recovering at Berenike after the long voyage, he would then have crossed the desert by camel caravan, stopping at various caravansaries along the way. He would have eventually arrived at the Nile port of Coptos, where he would have boarded a boat for his journey down the Nile to Alexandria on the Mediterranean Sea where the odyssey finally ends.

What kind of ship would he have sailed on? We have some idea from the Satavahana coins, of two-masted ships. There are also the

Ajanta murals and ship graffiti in Khor Rori in Oman and in Socotra and Palmyra. There is even an inscription of a four-masted ship at the Isis temple.

What would he have seen along the way? At Arikamedu, a few kilometers inland, on the banks of the Ariyankuppam river, he would have seen ring wells and bricks which had holes drilled on top of them, perhaps for wooden posts or palm fronds to hold them together. It would have been a bead-making centre, with shell bangles, rouletted ware, and Mediterranean amphorae and *terra sigillata*.

In Muziris, he would have smelt pepper. The architecture would have been similar to what he saw in Arikamedu. Interestingly, neither



Arikamedu nor Muziris have any Roman coins, though Roman coins have been found all over South India.

In Qana, he would have docked with the help of the lighthouse. He would have smelt frankincense and myrrh, and since it was a volcanic area, seen a lot of buildings made in basalt, and cisterns to provide water.

Ravi would have changed ships here, and moved to Berenike, an altogether different culture. The Ptolematics who succeeded Alexander in the 3rd century BCE built this city to herd and tame African elephants, after the Seleucid cut off access to Indian war elephants. The Romans took over around 30 BCE. With the Romans in charge, trade boomed. The Isis temple built and rebuilt between the 1st–5th centuries CE is a palimpsest of the various religions and languages that coexisted — from Greek or hieroglyphs to Sanskrit. It is important to note that Isis was the Egyptian goddess of the sea, also used by later Hellenistic and Roman cultures, protecting merchants and sailors — thus, explaining why there would be an Isis temple here.

Ravi would have seen the pet cemetery. He would have found twelve different languages being spoken.

The twelve-day journey by camel to Coptos would have been dotted with caravanserais — some fortified. From there, he would have taken a boat to Alexandria, one of the big Roman ports, with a famous library, museum, lighthouse, and university. He would have taken a bath in one of the Roman baths, and exhausted, handed over the goods to another merchant, who would have taken it forward.

Though it is highly unlikely that any single individual would have made this entire journey, they would most likely have landed on a port, and pushed their goods to the next merchant who would have taken it further. **– *P.P.***

PAST PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

What is European?

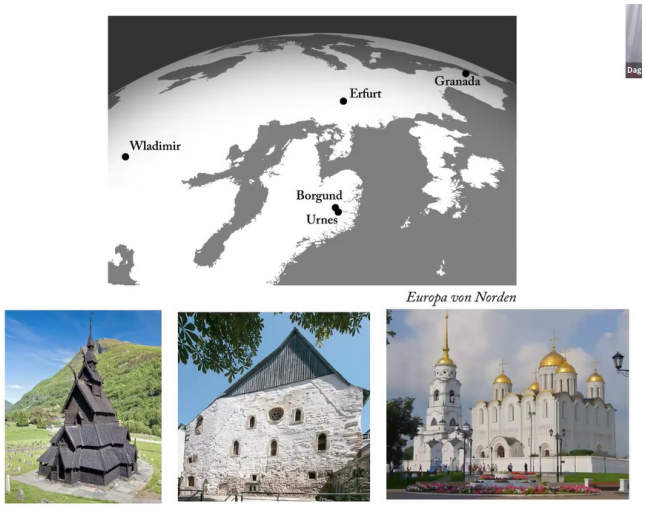
April 21st & 23rd, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Dag Nikolaus Hasse (Professor of the History of Philosophy at the University of Würzburg)

Prof. Dag Nikolaus Hasse speaks during 'What is European?'

The final lecture series of the Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory programme in this academic year was led by Professor Dag Nikolaus Hasse, Professor of the History of Philosophy at the University of Würzburg. The series, held over two consecutive lectures, was based on Hasse's 2025 book, *What is European? On Overcoming Colonial and Romantic Modes of Thought*. The book itself is the outcome of over two decades of research into the history of the exchange of ideas across Muslim, Jewish, and Christian intellectual worlds that have shaped the conceptualisation of Europe. Through this research, Hasse engages in a critical examination of dominant contemporary narratives about Europe and urges a more multicultural approach in understanding its history and its present.

The first lecture in the series tackled the opening two chapters of the book, *Decolonisation* and *Democratisation*. Hasse opened by identifying the two major periods whose legacies have had an enormous impact on contemporary understandings of European 'identity', namely the Enlightenment and the Romantic movements from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Emerging at the dawn of the colonial era and achieving its height in the late 19th century, this was the period that birthed the notion of a European exceptionalism, rooted in its inheritance of ancient Greek modes of thought and its adoption of the Christian faith. Claiming itself to be the continent of reason charged with a civilising mission, the Europe of the colonial period sought to distance itself from its own history of fusion and cosmopolitanism.

Hasse illustrated the development and continuing purchase of this idea through the use of cliches of Europe as examples. In the first cliche, he cited the French president Emmanuel Macron's invocation of European cultural traditions as being Greek temples, the Mona Lisa, Proust, Musil and the cafe. When seen together, all of these examples evoke a typically European cultural sphere. However, this is easily shaken when examined more closely. The cafe, for example, has its origins in the Islamic world, when the first coffeehouses appeared in the Arabian Peninsula and spread to Cairo, Persia, and Istanbul before arriving in Western Europe in the 1640s. Far from being distinctly European, the cafe is an institution that binds North Africa, West Asia, and Europe. Hasse further noted that Macron's conception was geographically narrow, centred on France, Germany, Italy, and England, and largely silent on Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and Spain.



Turning to the Enlightenment's claim to reason, Hasse argued that critical thinking and the questioning of authority are not uniquely

European attributes. It is well known that Confucian thinkers, Vedic philosophy, Buddhist intellectual traditions and Islamic scholarship have all engaged in examining the ideas of freedom, reason, justice, and order across a history spanning thousands of years. However, if we see the Enlightenment's acknowledgement of reason as being a critique of the church, both intellectually as well as in the material contexts of land and political power, it emerges as reaction against the secular power wielded by the church. Rather than being Europe's gift to the world, it was a solution to its own crisis that was then repackaged as universal truth when presented to its colonial subjects.

Georges Steiner, *The Idea of Europe*, 2004: "So long as there are coffee houses, the 'idea of Europe' will have content."

Coffeehouse with a storyteller (Meddah) in Istanbul (1838). The first coffee houses appeared in the Islamic world around 1500.

Source: Thomas Allom, *Constantinople and the Scenery of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor*, London 1838

In the second half of his lecture, Hasse addressed the Romantic myth of a unified Christian Europe. Drawing on writers such as Novalis and Chateaubriand, he showed how early 19th-century intellectuals reconstituted the medieval period as a golden age of Christian unity. Historically, this was a fiction, as medieval Europe included numerous Muslim rulers, especially in Andalusia and Sicily, Jewish communities who held a prominent place in society, and a significant Orthodox Christian presence controlling swathes of eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, centred in Constantinople. The presence of non-Christian peoples along the Baltic until well into the medieval period also cannot be ignored. Medieval writers themselves wrote of this diversity as normal, indicated with Hasse's example of an 11th-century bishop, Adam of Bremen, writing admiringly of the city of Wolin, situated on the Baltic coast as having inhabitants who were Slavs, Greeks, and 'Barbarians', to indicate Pagans, all living freely. The notion of a united Christian continent is an invention that the people of the medieval period would themselves have not recognised.

Hasse further challenged the assumption that Greek and Roman culture are fundamentally European. He noted that 24 UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Greek and Roman origin lie outside Europe, across North Africa and West Asia. Euclid lived his entire life in Alexandria. These were, he argued, Mediterranean and West Asian cultures that were only later selectively claimed as European heritage. Even the claim of Europe to be the inheritors of classical thought is easily challenged as classical Greek thought was revived in the Arab world and across West Asia after the fall of the western Roman empire, and it was the Arabic translations of the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and even Augustine, that later travelled to western Europe in the 12th century. To be a scholar in the great medieval western European university of Oxford, for example, fluency in Arabic was critical.

Hasse concluded his first lecture by flagging the ongoing political stakes of these cliches, pointing to Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 Regensburg Address as a recent example of the Romantic concept being deployed to exclude non-Christians, and even Protestant and Enlightenment thinkers from a narrowly defined European identity. It is a notion that, despite being a construction, continues to have growing cultural and political purchase in a world whose borders are increasingly defined.

On our second day, Hasse drew on the final two chapters of the book, *What is Typically European?* and *Multiethnic Cities: The Europe of the Future*, shifting focus from diagnosing Eurocentric cliches to proposing a constructive alternative engaging in a historically grounded, non-essentialist way of thinking about European culture without lapsing into anti-Europeanism. He opened by revisiting the problem of cultural concepts of Europe, illustrating it with a list of thirty keywords drawn from a published volume on European places of remembrance. The keywords included Michelangelo, Mona Lisa, Rembrandt, Classicism, Louvre, City Hall, Equestrian Monuments, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Tolstoy, Beethoven, Verdi, Chanson, Rome, Wittenberg, Geneva, Moscow as the third Rome, Istanbul, University, Coffee House, Pizza, Magna Carta, Tolerance, Anne Frank, Marie Curie and Simone

de Beauvoir. While the list made some effort toward inclusivity, including women such as Marie Curie and Simone de Beauvoir, Hasse noted that it remained heavily weighted toward a mid-Western European axis of Italy, Germany, France, and England. Spain, Scandinavia, the Orthodox Christian cultural sphere and Eastern Europe were largely absent. This, he argued, is a recurring problem with all cultural concepts of Europe: they reflect the preferences of dominant groups and, however well-intentioned, tend to be exclusionary.

In place of such essentialist definitions, Hasse proposed that one should look at specific cultural practices as they appeared at particular historical moments, and map their geographical spread to see their influence on a wider notion of identity. To illustrate this, he used three examples. First, we looked at the distribution of Ionic and Corinthian column capitals around 200 CE, which extended from Morocco to Patna, cutting across the known world. In the second example, he cited how the form of the sonata in music formed around 1790 in central Europe but spread widely across Europe and beyond. And in the third example, we looked at the Sephardic Jewish tradition of prayer that in the 19th century was practiced across North Africa, the Ottoman empire and southern Europe. Such examples expand culture beyond the confines of geography and empires, and it also works to dissolve the assumption that European culture is homogenous or that it exists only within fixed borders.

Hasse then offered three further examples of what becomes visible when this approach is applied. In 12th-century sacred architecture, the standard account privileges the Gothic style developed near Paris, yet Norwegian stave churches, the Erfurt synagogue, Orthodox churches in Vladimir, and mosque construction in Granada were all simultaneously active on the same continent. In 16th-century architecture, the legacy of Mimar Sinan, responsible for the Suleymaniye mosque in Istanbul and the Selimiye mosque in Edirne is as significant as that of Michelangelo, who was his contemporary. It was Sinan's vision that shaped the built environment of southeastern Europe for centuries, and yet he rarely appears in standard European architectural histories. While the reform movements of the church, both Catholic and Protestant, are acknowledged, scholarship of the 18th and 19th centuries regularly omits the liberal Judaism of Abraham Geiger and the Jadidist reform movements among Muslim subjects of the Russian empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries which advocated for modern education, female literacy, and the reconciliation of Quranic learning with Newtonian science.

Georges Steiner, *The Idea of Europe*, 2004: "So long as there are coffee houses, the 'idea of Europe' will have content."

In the second half of the lecture, Hasse addressed identity and cultural belonging. He argued that there is no privileged access to any cultural tradition: cultural forms, being human products, are open to all humans who engage with them sensitively and with historical awareness. To illustrate this further, he quoted at length from a 2000 interview with Edward Said, in which Said described himself as a cosmopolitan and universalist man who had come to distrust identity politics, having seen the damage that fixed identities, including those between rival Christian denominations in Jerusalem, inflict on humanity at large. Hasse reflected on Said's intellectual trajectory, noting that the humanist impulse was already present in *Orientalism*, where Said's critique of Western discourse about the Arab world was grounded in a deep love of European literature rather than a rejection of it.

In the discussion that followed both lectures, we touched on the imposition of identity by others before one has a chance to self-define, the distinction between cultural access and institutional access, and the conditions under which speaking for another culture requires care. Hasse concluded that while sensitivity and historical knowledge are essential when one speaks publicly about cultures not one's own, the openness of cultural heritage to all who engage with it seriously remains a principle worth defending. **– *A.T.***

Announcements

POSTGRADUATE COURSE IN INDIAN AESTHETICS

July 2026 – April 2027 | Typically Saturdays, 1:30 – 5:30 pm IST | Hybrid Mode: Physical & Online*

Platform: Zoom | Recording Available*

Introduced in 1999, Jnanapravaha Mumbai's academic, yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/ Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics (IA) examines the historical development of visual forms in context, employing the disciplines of art history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature, and philosophy. The course traverses 5,000 years of Indian visual art, including pre-modern, modern, and contemporary forms as well as popular traditions, to illuminate aesthetic trajectories in the subcontinent. Internationally renowned scholars introduce students to this art, ensuring a material, geographical, historical, social, and cultural base that is broad and extensively representative. In keeping with JPM's mission, the course has evolved over the years to include topics of current research.

Illustrated folios of the Devimahatmya, Nepal, c. 18th Century

For admission, you are required to submit:
A digital copy each of your last degree certificate, CV, short bio (100 words) and passport-size photograph.

Fee structure:
Diploma (subject to guided writing and attendance) – Rs. 1,00,000 | Certificate (subject to attendance) – Rs. 75,000

For registration, click here: www.jp-india.org.

* Please check details of hybrid mode on our website before registering.

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*Recorded lectures will be shared for 24 hours via Zoom on a predetermined date, with scholar approval.

ON BEAUTY: WESTERN THOUGHT FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

August 11th – October 13th, 2026 | Mainly Tuesdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST | Various Scholars

FEE: Rs. 10,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org | Recording Available*

Female head of the "Aphrodite of Cnidus" type, called "The Kaufmann Head" C. 150 BC. Provenance: Tralles (in present-day Turkey).

Beauty has long occupied a central place in human thought, shaping how societies understand art, ethics, emotion, and even truth. Yet, it is often treated as selfevident or universal, rather than as a concept shaped by culture, philosophy, and historical context. Across a yearlong programme offered in parts, the ACT programme examines what beauty has meant to societies across the world, and how its meanings have been constructed, debated, and transformed over time.

The programme begins with a 10-lecture series on the evolution of beauty within the Western philosophical tradition. From classical antiquity, where beauty was elevated by Plato to a transcendent Form, to Plotinus who conceived of beauty as an emanation of the divine, beauty was closely tied to harmony of both the visual world and of society. A cornerstone of the Italian Renaissance, beauty was seen by its philosophers, notably Marsilio Ficino, as the path leading one's soul back to the Divine. With the Enlightenment, beauty was increasingly systematised with Edmund Burke's characterization of the Sublime, Kant's definition of aesthetic judgement and the emergence of the picturesque as beauty made palatable. At the same time G.W.F Hegel theorised beauty to be the 'sensible shining of the idea', a revelation of reality that found its ultimate return to the Greek ideal in John Keats in his proclamation, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty".

Led by a global cohort of scholars at the cutting edge of scholarship on the subject, this first iteration of our yearlong course on beauty invites a deeper engagement with the values and assumptions that underpin aesthetic experience across Western philosophy.

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Aistė Čelkytė
Frisbee Sheffield
Hélène Ibata
Ota Gal
Paul Kottman
Ross Wilson
Stéphane Touissant

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REUNITING A *RAMAYANA*

SONYA RHIE MACE

July 30th, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Free Online Public Lecture on ZOOM | Register: www.jp-india.org

Epic of the Northwest Himalayas: Pahari Paintings from the "'Shangri' Ramayana", April 19, 2026 – August 16, 2026.

The *'Shangri' Ramayana* is presented in the first-ever exhibition dedicated solely to this widely dispersed, much debated pictorial series. The curator shares how, through the process of formulating the show, she came to understand previously unrecognised climaxes, strategies for visual narration across folios, and Pahari patronage systems. She will explain how she selected the forty individual works on display and the three episodes presented in animated digital sequences. Finally, she shares how the Cleveland Museum of Art approached the challenge of presenting the content and messaging of an ancient epic to audiences unfamiliar with the culture and history of India.

Sonya Rhie Mace, Ph.D. has been the George P. Bickford Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art since 2012, following eight years as Curator of Asian Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Her special exhibitions include *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose* (2007), *Tantra in Buddhist Art* (2013), *Mughal India: Art and Stories* (2016), *Revealing Krishna: Journey to Cambodia's Sacred Mountain* (2021), and *Epic of the Northwest Himalayas: Pahari Paintings from the 'Shangri' Ramayana* (2026). She continues to teach and publish her ongoing research on aspects of early Indian sculpture.

PUJA, POETRY AND PERFORMANCE: ENDURING *BHAKTI* TRADITIONS IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

August 5th, 12th,19th & 27th, 2026 | Mainly Wednesdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST

FEE: Rs. 4,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org | Recording Available*

Sanmukha_Tamilnadu -Madurai region_ Nayaka_ Late 17th century_ Ivory_ 8 x 5.5 cm

Puja, Poetry and Performance: Enduring *Bhakti* Traditions in the Indian Subcontinent is a four-lecture series focussing on various strands of the *bhakti* tradition in the region. Both texts and material evidence confirm the great diversity of religions and their affiliated cultures that have thrived here for more than two millennia. Apart from 'mainstream' religions, for instance, those known today as Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, many other religious streams which are designated as 'popular' also existed. These myriad religious views and practices in society were not isolated; coexistence meant that they often re-envisioned themselves as they cross fertilised. This series will delve into Shaiva *Bhakti* and the *Tevaram*; explore the veneration of Murugan, particularly popular in Southern India, from an early period; examine the dramatically performative *Navratri* festival as well as the poetry of the Alvars.

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Richard Davis
Indira Peterson
Vasudha Narayanan
Archana Venkatesan

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UNPACKING THE *'SHANGRI' RAMAYANA*

SONYA RHIE MACE

August 6th & 7th, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:45 pm IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 2,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/-
Online on ZOOM | Register: www.jp-india.org | Recording Available*

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Julia and Larry Pollock Focus Gallery. Photography Courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art.

In 2026 the Cleveland Museum of Art published a catalogue of Pahari paintings from the Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Ralph Benkaim Collection. To accompany the catalogue, the museum developed an exhibition focussed on recontextualising the Benkaim Collection paintings from the *'Shangri' Ramayana*. Through the process of reuniting the pictorial series, the curator found that the *'Shangri' Ramayana* reveals aspects about Pahari painting patronage and artistic practice that have not been emphasised in previous studies. In two fully illustrated lectures, she presents the latest findings and conclusions pertaining to what appears to be the most extensive pictorial Ramayana known to date.

6th August: The *'Shangri' Ramayana*: Histories and Historiographies
7th August: Individual or Collective? Locating Meaning and Value in a Pictorial Series

Sonya Rhie Mace, Ph.D. has been the George P. Bickford Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art since 2012, following eight years as Curator of Asian Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Her special exhibitions include *Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose* (2007), *Tantra in Buddhist Art* (2013), *Mughal India: Art and Stories* (2016), *Revealing Krishna: Journey to Cambodia's Sacred Mountain* (2021), and *Epic of the Northwest Himalayas: Pahari Paintings from the 'Shangri Ramayana'* (2026). She continues to teach and publish her ongoing research on aspects of early Indian sculpture.

AT THE EDGE OF EMPIRE: THE ART AND CULTURE OF PALMYRA

ALESSANDRA RICCI

October 14th, 15th & 16th, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Online Public Lecture on ZOOM

Registration Fee: Rs. 3,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/- | Recording Available*

Funerary bust: the so-called "Beauty of Palmyra," 190–210 CE, Palmyrene

The ancient city of Palmyra began as a humble trade oasis in the Syrian desert, but at its height, it was one of the greatest cities in the ancient world. At the crossroads of the Roman, Persian, and Arab worlds, Palmyra was a cosmopolitan haven. Here, business was done in Aramaic, Latin, Greek, and Palmyrene, local gods wore Roman dress, and camel caravans carried silk, spices, textiles, and ideas between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

In this three-lecture series led by Alessandra Ricci, we trace Palmyra's art, architecture, and religious life as expressions of a deeply hybrid culture that absorbed Greco-Roman, Parthian, and Semitic traditions without ever fully surrendering to any of them, moving from the city's origins as a desert trading post to its zenith under Queen Zenobia, and examining its temples, funerary portraits, and monumental colonnades as evidence of a society that thought of itself as genuinely cosmopolitan. The series also confronts Palmyra's more recent, and more tragic history, asking what it means to lose, and to try to remember, a city that always belonged to more than one world.

Alessandra Ricci is an Associate Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine Archaeology and cultural heritage at Koç University in Istanbul. An *academic migrant* from Rome to Istanbul via the United States, her research interests centre on the city of Constantinople, its Asiatic and European hinterlands in the Late Antique and Byzantine periods. As a field archaeologist, she has excavated the monastery of *Satyros/Anatellon* built by patriarch Ignatios (867-877) in Istanbul where she has coordinated public archaeology activities together with a site management plan and a conservation programme. She works and publishes on the diachronicity of buildings and their relationship with urban and landscape contexts, on material culture associated with archaeological areas and architecture and on the contemporary reception of Byzantine studies.

BETWEEN THE EYE AND THE SOUL: BEAUTY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

October 27th – December 1st, 2026 | Mainly Tuesdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST | Various Scholars

FEE: Rs. 6,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org | Recording Available*

Ceiling of the Hall of Kings, showing the first Nazaries sultans 1410 - 1424, Alhambra, Spain

In Islamic thought, beauty was never a question for artists alone. Rather, it was a question for theologians, philosophers, mystics, and poets, each asking what it means for the divine to leave its trace in the visible, audible, and felt world. In this second edition of our yearlong examination of the question of beauty in world philosophies, we trace that question from its *Quran*'s and theological roots through the great philosophers of the Islamic world. Through the sensory culture of Islamic visual art traced from its earliest forms, through the Sufi tradition and into the modern world, the series traces how the love of the beautiful leads one on a path toward the love of God.

Beginning with the philosophical and theological foundations of beauty in Quranic vocabulary through to the philosophical treatises of the greatest thinkers of the Islamic world from Avicenna to Ibn al-Haytham, we journey through the visual, material, and devotional meanings embedded in art, architecture, poetry, calligraphy, and music. Across six sessions led by three pathbreaking scholars, the series offers a sustained meditation on what beauty meant, and still means, in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Jamal Elias
Sara Kuehn
Valerie Gonzalez

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NORMAN SICILY: BUILDING A COURT OF WONDERS

LISA RILLEY & YOSSEF RAPOPORT

December 8th, 9th & 10th, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Online Public Lecture on ZOOM

Registration Fee: Rs. 3,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,000/- | Recording Available*

Coronation Mantle of Roger II, 1133/34. Norman Sicily

In the 11th century, a small band of Norman adventurers seized Sicily from its Arab rulers and built, almost by accident, one of the most extraordinary courts in medieval history. Under King Roger II, Palermo became a city where Latin Christians, Greek Orthodox clergy, and Arab Muslim scholars worked, worshipped, and built extraordinary cathedrals, palaces and civic buildings side by side. Mosaics in Byzantine gold sat beneath Arabic *muqarnas* ceilings carved with hunting scenes and courtly pleasures. Royal charters were issued in Latin, Greek, and Arabic on the same page. In this three-lecture series, we trace how Norman Sicily's art and architecture, from the Cappella Palatina to the cathedrals of Monreale, the unique textile arts and the pioneering arts of Islamic map making, gave visual form to a court that ruled not by erasing difference but by absorbing it, producing a hybrid culture unlike anything else in the medieval Mediterranean.

The series moves from the conquest and its immediate aftermath through the height of Norman royal patronage, examining how king, church, and craftsman together built a visual language equal to the kingdom's improbable diversity. Through the series, we also examine what became of this fragile synthesis after the Normans, and what Sicily's afterlife as a crossroads can still tell us about the limits and possibilities of cultural plurality.

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We know we have made a difference. Our endeavour to encourage and facilitate pedagogy meaningfully continues with the firm belief that the humanities are indispensable to the well-being of the community and the individual.

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Contributors to the Quarterly:

AT - Adira Thekkuveettil
AM - Ashwin Malhotra
CB - Cristina Bogdan
DC - Dina Chandaria
JK - Jaya Kanoria
PP - Prathyush Parasuraman
PS - Preshita Shah
STK - Sandeep TK

Text Editor: Suchita Parikh-Mundul

Design and Layout: Sharon Rodrigues

*****

Queens Mansion, 3rd Floor, G. Talwatkar Marg,
Fort, Mumbai - 400001. India.
www.jp-india.com
Facebook: JnanapravahaAtMumbai | Twitter: @Jnanapravaha_M | Instagram: Jnanapravaha_Mumbai