



JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI QUARTERLY

OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2026

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Director's Note

Our academic year started on a very positive note on July 18th, 2026, with a well-informed, thoughtful, intellectually curious cohort of 55 participants from various national and global geographies signing up for the yearlong Diploma in Indian Aesthetics. The sessions are lively and full of eager questions despite being in a hybrid format which can fracture the togetherness.

In the first edition of the idea of Beauty explored through the Western lens of Antiquity to Enlightenment, the sessions have traversed through the philosophies and writings of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Ficino, Kant, and Hegel. Thinkers such as Burke and the poet Shelley will end this enriching but demanding series of lectures delivered by specialist academicians. The second module of Beauty, titled 'Between the Eye and the Soul: Beauty in Islamic Thought' will examine how theologians, philosophers, mystics, artists, and poets questioned what it means for the divine to leave its trace in the visible, audible, and felt world. Each of these editions are interspersed with a series of lectures over about a week, on topics such as 2nd–3rd-century-CE Palmyra and the Normans of Sicily, through a divergent framework of Cosmopolitanism, Hybridity, Trade, and Conquest. Details of the above can be browsed within this *Quarterly* along with all the session writeups of the past few months.

Bhakti as a movement of devotion across the Indic land is one of our newest themes. Accordingly, the historically earliest Tamil landscape replete with poetry, ritual, temples, and spheres of divine relationships marked the first iteration and will be followed annually by a systematic tracing of this hoary subject. A magisterial essay under our Slant/Stance section does a deep dive on Tamil Bhakti. Please do read it at the end of this *Quarterly*.

Further, the world of 'Shangri' Pahari Painting and its fairytale realm of heroes and heroines, whether worldly or otherworldly, was unpacked through the telling of the *Ramayana*, the subject of an epic exhibition walkthrough.

A proud announcement! Jnanapravaha Mumbai and Universita Di Napoli L'Orientale, Italy have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to develop reciprocal academic and educational cooperation through the visit and exchange of students and staff for

training, study, and research, as well as for joint research. We are deeply honoured and look forward to the beginning of a mutually rewarding and beneficial relationship.

As always, we look forward to having you amidst us whether physically or virtually. Do keep an eye out as there are several announcements on the anvil.

Till then, warmest wishes for the ongoing festive season, and a Happy Diwali.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rashmi Poddar', with a stylized, cursive script.

Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.
Director

AESTHETICS

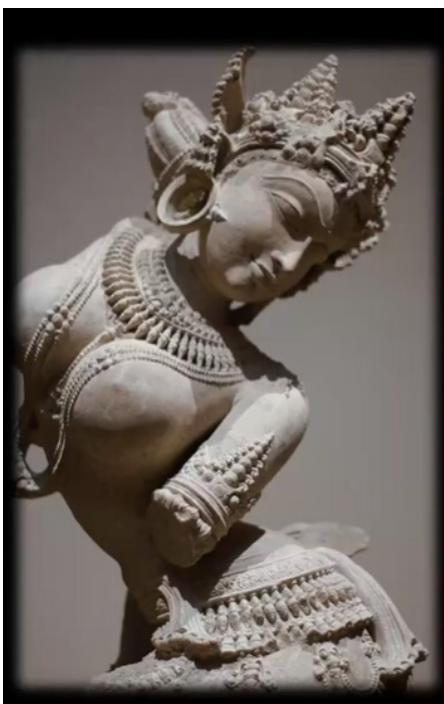


A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

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



The Indian Aesthetics (IA) course continues to be hybrid this year; however, the early sessions from July to September are largely in-person; most of the resource scholars in this period come to our beautifully restored heritage space at Fort. Occasionally, students from other cities travel to Mumbai, perhaps drawn both by the promise of in-person interactions and by the mesmeric quality of our space, which has state-of-the-art equipment and a large screen. Our reading room is full of rare books related to Indian art, art history, history, archaeology, architecture and aesthetics, philosophy, contemporary art, and critical theory.

Several Mumbai students have been in class regularly this year; of course, online students are able to ask live questions as usual. IA 2026-27 also has international students from the USA, the UK, and Bangladesh, and from Indian towns and cities such as Bengaluru, Chandigarh, Chennai, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Kanpur, Kottayam, New Delhi, Palampur, Pune, Thane, and Vadodara. It is particularly satisfying that our students hail from four countries,

and as many as ten States and two Union Territories of India, completely justifying the hybrid format of the course. As always, fresh graduates and accomplished, highly educated professionals from varied backgrounds are part of the Indian Aesthetics course, making for vibrant, wide-ranging discussions. Forty-five students are enrolled in IA 2026-27 and thirty of these are part of the IA Diploma, a rigorous writing programme where each student will receive focused attention and painstaking feedback on their academic assignments.

Classes commenced on 18th July 2026 and engaged the Indic aesthetic theory of *Rasa*, relevant philosophy from the region, as well as history, art history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature, and theology to create interpretive frameworks for a contextual understanding of the art of the subcontinent. This interdisciplinary method is ideal in the teaching of Indian Aesthetics and is superbly deployed by Jnanapravaha's director, Dr. Rashmi Poddar. It enables the IA course to logically connect 5,000 years of visual art from the subcontinent in an approximately chronological manner. Her unique approach as usual began with an introduction to classical Indian aesthetics, explaining the particular nature, form, content, and meaning of Indic art. Introducing *Rasa* theory as explicated in Bharata's *Natyashastra*, a dramaturgical compendium which elaborates *Rasa* as emotions generated in the cultured viewer or the *rasika* when experiencing art, she showed how this could be expanded through the visual arts. Dr. Poddar's sessions introduced the class to masterpieces of Indic sculpture and painting, and offered an understanding of important Indian artistic styles.



Dr. Veena Londhe speaks during 'History of Indian Aesthetics and its Theories & Abhinavagupta – His Yoga & Aesthetic Concerns'

Dr. Veena Londhe's introduction to Sanskrit poetics focused tightly on insights related to *Rasa* and its application to the arts. Bringing in the

commentaries of important philosophers on *Rasa*, she showed how Abhinavagupta's 10th-century text, the *Rasasutra*, expanded Bharata's ideas and introduced the ninth *rasa*, called '*shanta*'.



Dr. Kurush Dalal's survey of the Harappan civilisation from its beginnings to its aftermath showed the high probability of long-standing economic linkages between various cities in the region at the northwest frontier of modern-day India and beyond, including Egypt and the Red Sea region. This expansive territory has yielded evidence in the shape of material remains.

Professor Naman Ahuja explored the early terracotta of the subcontinent along with ivory and other materials from that period, showing that terracottas were likely 'mass produced', sometimes using 'modular' technology as also seen in ancient China. This prolific production was seemingly achieved by creatively combining moulds. Dr. Shailendra Bhandare's lectures delved into the political history and the art of the Satavahana kingdom by examining coins from the period. Dr. Bhandare and Prof. Ahuja clearly showed that terracotta and numismatics, often relegated to the category of the 'lesser arts', are of seminal importance in the reconstruction of history, and are as significant as the ostensible 'high' arts.



Dr. Jaya Kanoria's lectures on the basics of academic writing for IA Diploma students are always open to the entire class as they also focus on how to read effectively in this genre. Students collaboratively read and analysed an academic text, learning how to present content in a scholarly manner and argue their point convincingly.



Dr. Supriya Rai read the life and teachings of the Buddha through stone sculptural masterpieces found at ancient Buddhist sites in the subcontinent as well as other Buddhist art. The scholar showed that Buddhism, rather than remaining a singular philosophy or faith, split into eighteen schools not long after the Buddha's passing, before its eventual spread through the Asian continent. *Jataka* stories hold within them Buddhist philosophical concepts; the scholar displayed their representations in both murals and sculpted panels which were once used to teach the *Dhamma* to early believers who visited ancient and medieval Buddhist sites. Explaining terms such as 'Buddha', '*Dhamma*' and '*Sangha*', the four Noble Truths, and the doctrine of Dependent Origination, Dr. Rai analysed scholarly opinions regarding aniconic (non-figural) and iconic (figural) representations of the Buddha.

Dr. Kalyani Ramachandran presented the material found at Phanigiri, a Buddhist site where extensively damaged architectural remains have been found. Swati Chemburkar shed light on Vajrayana Buddhism through a study of the art, philosophy, and rituals of these tantric practices which were connected closely to the political.

Tantric texts are written in *sandhya bhasha*, a 'twilight language' that cannot be understood by those outside the traditions. Secretive as they are, *tantric* practices have recently become known because some former adherents, especially women, have written about their long engagement with tantric cults. The scholar also presented a lecture on *Prajnaparamita*, a Vajrayana Buddhist text which evolved into a goddess. *Prajnaparamita* is represented only rarely in the Indian subcontinent though she is beautifully depicted in other regions such as Southeast Asia. Ms. Chemburkar's primary research has identified some unknown painted and sculptural representations of *Prajnaparamita*.



Dr. Kalyani Ramachandran speaks during 'Early Buddhist Sculpture in Riverine South India'

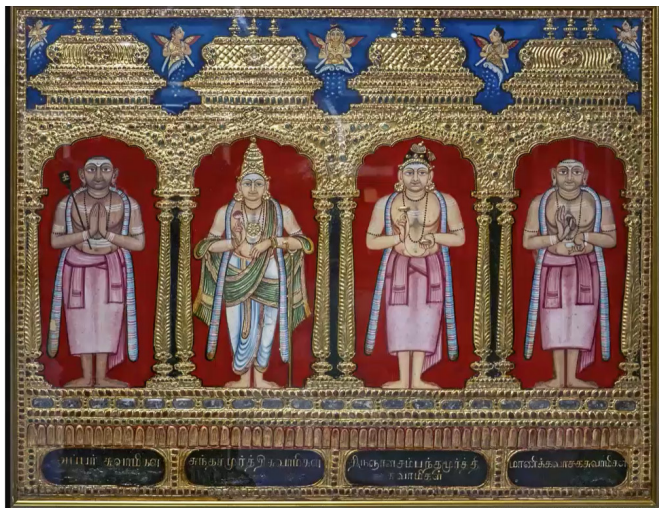
The first quarter of the IA 2026-27 has been a rich and immersive experience for students and scholars alike. From October onwards, the IA course will move into Jainism and the art associated with it. - J.K.

Puja, Poetry and Performance: Enduring Bhakti Traditions in the Indian Subcontinent

PAST PROGRAMMES

The Thevaram Hymns: Tamil Shaiva Bhakti in Text and Performance

August 5th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Indira Viswanathan Peterson (Professor Asian Studies, Emerita, at Mount Holyoke College, USA)



Dr. Indira Viswanathan Peterson's talk was entitled 'The *Thevaram* Hymns: Tamil Shaiva Bhakti in Text and Performance'. Her talk focused on the three chief saints of the canon – Sambandar, Appar, and Sundaramurti Nayanar. The 63 saints known as the *Nayanmars* lived between the 6th and 8th centuries, and together, composed 796 *Thevaram* hymns. These three saints, along with Manickavachakar, author of the *Thiruvachakam* and *Thirukkovaiyar*, are the great leaders of the Shaiva tradition.

The *Thevaram* hymns are *padikams*, poems in 10 or 11 stanzas in different musical metres. They have their roots in *Sangam* poetry, and are written in such a way that they can be recited as well as sung. These saints travelled across shrines of Shiva in South India, and parts of Sri Lanka, and also select sites in North India, singing songs to Lord Shiva. They laid the foundation for what

became the Tamil Shaiva tradition.

Early Tamil Bhakti involves an intimate relationship between the devotee and God. It is an emotional devotion, and the poetry is in the vernacular. There are elements of moving away from social norms and forming an alternate community of devotees. The resulting Shaiva sect was still led by Brahmins and non-Brahmin elite, but it had a popular base. It became the majority religion of the Tamil-speaking region.

There are 274 sacred spaces, called the '*paadal petra sthalams*', where these saints sang their songs, most of them in the Kaveri delta. This tradition is continued to this day, by performance of these songs at the temples by '*oduvars*', who are reciters or singers of these texts. These hymns were collected as the *Thevaram*, and canonised as Tamil scripture in the 11th/12th centuries. The lives of these 63 saints were collected in the *Periya Puranam* by Sekkilar, and this became the 12th book of the canon. The *Thevarams* (the poetry of the saints) constitutes the first 7 books.

This Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta theology and philosophy was led by non-Brahmin teachers at Shaivite monastic organisations, at Dharmapuram and Thiruvavaduthurai. These still flourish and lead the Tamil Shaiva sect.

Dr. Peterson then went on to talk about the poetry itself, and its enchantment. She said it spoke of emotional devotion, a vernacular



him milk, and when asked, the child Sambandar pointed towards the *gopuram* where Parvati sat, indicating that she was the one who had fed him. This event is memorialised in his iconography. All sculptures show him with his finger pointing upwards.

The second saint Dr. Peterson spoke of was Appar. Originally a Jain, he converted to Shaivism after being cured of a terrible illness, and spent his life taking care of Shiva temples. He is shown carrying a hoe with which he cleaned the temple courtyards. His name was Thirunavakarasar, but he is fondly called 'Appar' the father, as he was called by the child saint Sambandar. In the song Dr. Peterson sang, composed by Appar, the saint calls out to the Lord, asking why he will not cure his deadly disease, despite his constant appeals.

poetry of intimate relationship, and eloquently modelled the most exalted experience of Bhakti as an all-consuming relationship with God. She reminisced about her first experience of listening to the *Thevarams* as a child in Chennai, listening to the words in her native language, Tamil, and the evocative poetry which spoke of sacred places of God in beautiful landscapes. It is this enchantment which she next tried to convey to us, by singing some of the more popular hymns.

She started with a poem by Sambandar, which describes the Lord wearing a woman's earring on one ear, riding on his bull, crowned with a pure white crescent moon, body smeared with ash from the burning ground. He is the thief who stole my (the poet's) heart. Dr. Peterson also spoke about Sambandar and his life – he received the Lord's grace at the age of 3, and united with his Lord at the tender age of 16. He received divine grace and knowledge through Parvati herself feeding

The next saint is Sundaramurti Nayanar – the handsome prince. He was a young man torn between desire and devotion. He is portrayed in bronzes as a dashing young man, with his two wives. In his songs, he adopts a familiar, teasing tone with Shiva, asking him for things like gold, silks, a flashing sword, and even horses. In his poetry, Sundarar asks Shiva to act as go-between in his love affairs. He is about to get married, when Shiva appears in the form of an old man, showing him a document that claims that the bridegroom is his bound servant. Eventually, Sundarar realises that the old man is Shiva himself.

The *oduvar* singers commit to memory all the 796 songs, and sing them at temple rituals. They can be sung with or without knowledge of Carnatic music. Dr. Peterson concluded her talk by screening videos of the *Thevaram* songs sung by *oduvars* as well as Carnatic musicians. – **A.S.**



Dr. Indira Viswanathan Peterson speaks during 'The Thevaram Hymns: Tamil Shaiva Bhakti in Text and Performance'

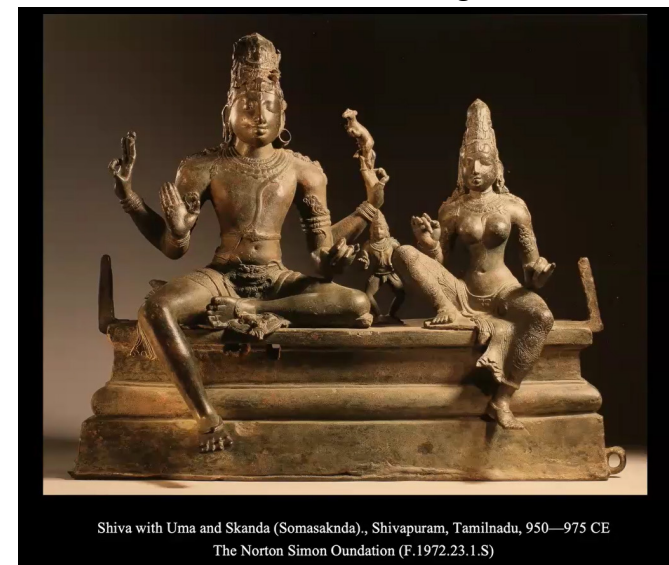
Murugan: Deity of Early Tamil Nadu

August 12th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Richard Davis (Professor Emeritus and Research Professor of Religion at Bard College, New York)

As its title suggests, Dr. Richard Davis's talk has been an excavation of the regional Tamil identity inscribed in Murugan imaging, worship, and devotional literature in South India. The scholar has carved up the conversation on Murugan into two sections. The first, titled 'Murugan and His Two Wives', is an exploration of the early iconographical history of Murugan, the tribal god of the hill country of the Tamilakam, as reflected in popular devotional imagery of the deity in India today. The second, called 'Devotion to Murugan', examines religious literature dedicated to Murugan within the Tamil bhakti tradition (6th to 9th centuries CE) through its assimilation of vital conventions of the Puram genre of ancient

in the form of towering statues of the deity in Puthira Goundampalayam and Vellore in Tamil Nadu, and at the Batu Caves in Malaysia, besides being inscribed in early devotional poetry of the Sangam age. Murugan can also be found in his six principal shrines, the *Aarupadaveetukal*, spread out across the Tamil Nadu countryside. These are Thiruparankundram, Tiruchendur, Palani, Swamimalai, Tirutanni, and Pazhamudircholai. Each of these sacred temple towns has been integrated into the Murugan-Skanda myth-making exercise, serving as sites for significant episodes in his divine life narrative.

Murugan's North Indian presence as Skanda, says Davis, situates him as "the ambiguous son of Shiva and Parvati" and as "a special born leader of the army of the gods". Skanda's identity, he adds, was first articulated in episodes of the *Mahabharata*, and further materialised through the eponymous *Kumarasambhava* in Kalidasa's epic poem written in the golden age of the Gupta period in 5th century CE. By this time, the Gupta kings were taking his name, and he had even begun to be emblazoned on their coins. Several other origin stories surround Skanda. In one, he is the offspring of Agni who engages in illicit relations with the Kritikas (the wives of the seven sages); in another, he is born of the white hot seed of Shiva the ascetic, and carried by Agni to be dropped into the waters of the Ganges, where he is born; in this telling, Skanda sprouts six heads and becomes Shanmukham in order to be nursed simultaneously by the six Kritikas. Their nurturance of him also earns him the moniker 'Kartikeya'. Interestingly, both the northern and southern devotional traditions emphasise the deity's youth, beauty, virility, and valour. In his seminal 1978 book, *The Many Faces of Murugan: The History and Meaning of a South Indian God*, Fred Clothey calls the Murugan-Skanda composite a "second-generation deity" as the son of other primary or primordial gods from the Hindu pantheon like Shiva or Agni.



Sangam poetry. The lecture outlines the ways in which the iconography of Murugan or Seyon (the god with the ruddy complexion) is now effectively married with that of the pan-Indian deity from the Vedic Shaiva tradition, Skanda. Part of the Puranic synthesising of smaller localised gods from the south of the Indian subcontinent with broader Vedic/Sanskritic deities from the north, the Murugan-Skanda composite has gradually been embedded in a many-sided mythology of its own.

Murugan may be known by several names: Subramanya, Kumara, Kartikeya, Shanmukham, and Velayudam, among others, but, argues Davis, he has a robust and distinctive regional identity in Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia. The resilience of that Tamil identity is made visible

By the 5th century CE, in the south of the subcontinent, the imperial Pallavas recognised the political gains of assimilating into the Sanskritic



The peacock, says Davis, is also emblematic of the frenzied dance of possession performed by Murugan's tribal devotees. So deeply ingrained is it in the deity's imagery that his *vel* or spear is often adorned with peacock feathers.

In the first session, the scholar surveys Murugan-Skanda iconography via a series of modern god prints produced in the 20th century by celebrated names in Hindu religious art. In *Subramanian and His Wives*, designed by Ravi Varma and published by his press (1900–1911), the Murugan icon is curated for a pan-Indian audience. He is a six-headed deity with eight arms brandishing multiple weapons. This Murugan-Skanda straddles a plumed peacock quelling a cobra, its train almost halo-like around the central figures. The youthful god is flanked on both sides by his two wives, here represented as near-identical in features and dress. Five decades later, well-known calendar and religious artists, C. Kondiah Raju and T. S. Subbiah, show us a Murugan shorn of the anthropomorphic features found in Ravi Varma's conception, in *Sri Tirutani Murugan* (1960s), a print in which we see his wives clearly differentiated by complexion: Devasena as fair-skinned, Mahavalli's darker skin tone washed in inky blue. The super-anthropomorphising of the deity is also muted in *Young Murugan*, a late 20th-century print ascribed to the Ravi Varma Press. Here Murugan is Kumara, a hallowed young boy wielding a spear, his *vel* distinguished by a spearhead shaped as a *venkai* leaf, with which he fatally cleaved the mango tree into which Surapadman had transformed himself during their legendary battle. The boy-god's arm rests on his resplendent peacock, the *tripundra* across his forehead places him squarely in the Shaiva tradition, while a *gopuram* in the far background serves as a reminder of his Tamil identity. A similar young Murugan makes an appearance in Kondiah and Subbiah's *Sri Kamala Murugan* (1960s), this time seated on a lotus in a pond, his *vel* in his left hand, while his right denotes the *abhaya mudra*.

For the 'Company Style' painter, S. Sita Ram, Murugan iconography is a place-making exercise. Three separate god prints from the 1970s by the artist locate Murugan against the backdrop of the Arulmighu Dhandayuthapani Swamy Temple, a renowned hilltop shrine dedicated to Murugan in the town of Palani. In two of the prints, *Palani Murugan* and *Arulmiha Palani*

traditions of the north. They embraced the origin story of Murugan-Skanda as the offspring of Shiva and Parvati, and began to analogise themselves and their progeny with this divine family. Correspondingly, says Davis, Murugan's pan-Indian identity also evolved in the Sangam literature of the time, especially in the narrative poems of the *Pattu Paatu* (*The Ten Idylls*). Skanda's synthesis with Murugan in South India seems to have been complete by the early medieval period. Between the 6th and 7th centuries CE, the religious consolidation was evident from the appearance of his two wives in Tamil devotional iconography. Devasena, from the Sanskrit or Aryan devotional lineage, constitutes the older of the two consorts, while Mahavalli, the slender daughter of a hunter chieftain of a Tamil hill tribe, is positioned as the younger, in this divine amalgam. The imagery also typically alludes to a vital Puranic narrative of Murugan-Skanda's triumph as a warrior god over the ferocious demon, Surapadman. Upon his defeat, the demon undergoes a two-pronged transformation: the first as a rooster, which Murugan employs in his *Seval Kodi* or sacred flag, and the second, as his divine vehicle, a peacock, who is often seen subduing a cobra with his claws, thereby supplanting primal animus with righteous order.

Thangamayil Murugan, we see the elaborately ornamented young god, Kumara. In the first instance, he is framed against the *thangamayil* or golden peacock. In the second, we are shown the young deity in close-up, bearing his trademark *vel* and cock banner. In the third print, *Palani Malai Kalyana Murugan*, Sita Ram depicts an older, married, four-armed Murugan with his two wives, delineated by attire and complexion, in a formal and iconic 'sanctum-view' posture, bearing two implements. His peacock, a minor character in this portrayal, stands behind the main actors. In each of the prints, the subjects are superimposed against a standardised illustration of the celebrated temple, featuring processional vehicles, a troop of musicians, and even a devotee bearing a *kavadi*, a decorated structure symbolising faith and penitence, usually attached to his back by fishhooks, representing the fierce allegiance to the deity in Tamil Nadu.

Davis also examines two other prints, which portray Murugan-Skanda, not as the principal subject, but as the younger son of Shiva. These tableaux of the God of Destruction with his family are a clear nod to the deity's North-Indian or Sanskritic roots. The first setting is at once sanctum-like and domestic. Shiva, his consort Parvati, and their two sons, Ganesha and an infant Skanda, sit on a capacious throne surrounded by the snow-capped peaks of the high Himalayas. At their feet, in this symmetrical composition, are a reclining Nandi, Shiva's mount, and Skanda's peacock. In the second tableau titled *Shiva Panchayatana* (1952-53), by the Nathadwara artist, Lakshmilal, the family is found in a formal, courtly setting. Shiva and Parvati sit on a throne under the royal canopy; their two sons offer obeisance on either side of the couple as courtiers and priests look on. The Skanda in this image with his six heads and eight arms, harks back to Ravi Varma's depiction of him nearly forty years earlier. A large Nandi reclines at the feet of his divine master, although the peacock is conspicuously absent. An examination of Tamil bronze sculpture of the Somaskanda, from the Chola period (950-975 CE), reveals a South Indian preoccupation with religious sculpture featuring Shiva with Uma and a diminutive Skanda between them, from the Pallava dynasty onward. Davis says the Somaskanda is a common processional icon described in early medieval Agama texts which served as detailed manuals

for various aspects of temple building, sacred image making, ritualised worship, and the four-fold path of spiritual knowledge.

Murugan-Skanda becomes increasingly visible in aspects of Sangam poetry by the early medieval



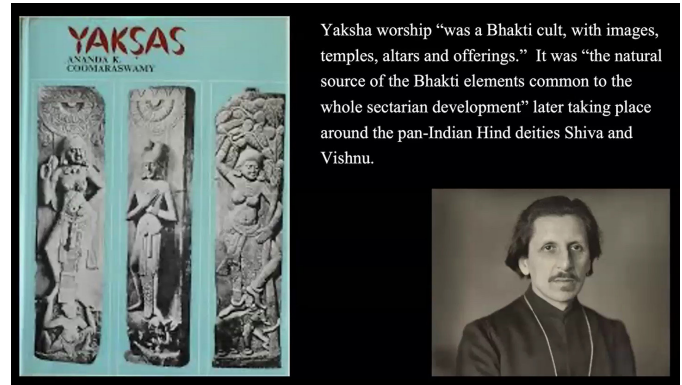
period. Unlike *Akam* – the Sangam poetry of the interior, written by unnamed poets, focusing on the private world of emotions, romantic love, and domestic life – *Puram*, namely the poetry of the exterior, is concerned with worldly matters, society, war, and the heroism of kings and chieftains, authored by named poets who are oftentimes described and celebrated in its verses. Davis turns to the natural schema – both topographic and affective – outlined by A. K. Ramanujan in his essay, 'Form in Tamil Poetry', to explore the imaging of Murugan within the genre of *Puram* poetry. These include the *Kurinci* (mountainous or hilly regions), the *Mullai* (forests or pastures), the *Marudam* (an agrarian countryside), the *Neytal* (the seaside), and the *Palai* (an arid wasteland). Correlated by interconnected features, says Ramanujan, each nature-scape evokes rich literary and emotive resonances within a discerning Tamil reader. Murugan or Seyon, is the resident deity of the *Kurinci*, or the hill country, in Sangam poetry, and as such, is also emblematic of the clandestine union of lovers. He presides over the hunt and is worshipped by the hill tribes. His iconography within the schema of the *Kurinci* typically encompasses references to mountains, waterfalls, the *venkai* tree, the seasons of winter and early frost, and virile and powerful animals like the elephant, horse, bull, and monkey. He is also associated with local occupations like safeguarding and harvesting millet, hunting, and gathering honey. But in this early representation, he is merely a localised deity, unencumbered by the transcendent identity of a mainstream god. Surapadman, Murugan's nemesis, too, is seen

as an amorphous demonic force that unleashes terror in the hill country, in early Sangam poetry. Over time, he is imaged as a male demon who is killed by Murugan's spear.

In the second session of the lecture which examines Murugan's place in the bhakti tradition of Tamil Nadu, Davis returns to his own work, *Religions of Early India: A Cultural History*, to articulate the nature and evolution of bhakti in India. He views it first as a sensibility underlying the pre-Vedic indigenous worship of formless natural entities, in line with A. K. Coomaraswamy's work on *yaksha*-worship as a bhakti cult with images, temples, altars, and offerings, accessible to devotees at local shrines. In the second instance, Davis speaks of "a fuller, more complex articulation of bhakti as a religious path" during the Kushana period, made available in epic Sanskrit literature, like the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Harivamsa*. Bhakti here is defined by personal commitment and often, a strong emotional attachment of the devotee to the divine figure. Krishna, for instance, presents the path of bhakti to Arjuna as an underlying theory of "selfless action" in which "wholehearted devotion" to a personal divine figure can lead the devotee to a state of "equanimity in action". In the third and final instance, Davis discusses bhakti in the context of the Shaiva Nayanmar and Vaishnava *Alvar* poet-saints during the Chalukya and Pallava dynasties (6th–9th centuries CE), who composed devotional poetry dedicated to local deities at specific shrines, in an accessible Tamil vernacular, their descriptions of the divine moving from the particular to the abstract, their verses articulating a god who was at once immanent and transcendent. The poetry of the *Nayanmars* and the *Alvars*, adds Davis, served as a spiritual blueprint on how to be a devotee, and how to see God. As the first of the regional bhakti movements to emerge across the subcontinent, it would constitute a paradigm for the philosophy of bhakti as we understand it today.

The scholar turns to A. K. Ramanujan's translation of the *Tirumurugatrupadai* or *Guide to Lord Murugan*, a lengthy 6th-century-CE poem, by Nakkirar, a post-Sangam era Tamil poet, to discuss Murugan worship within the bhakti tradition. Part of the *Pattu Paatu* anthology, it is what Ramanujan calls "the earliest, long, full-fledged bhakti poem". Its verse takes the form

of an *Atrupadai*, or a guide poem, common to the *Puram* genre in Sangam literature, where a poet-narrator seeks to guide a poet-listener to a generous chieftain or king who could be a potential benefactor or patron. This framework of advice from one poet to another is integral to *Puram* poetry, as is the poet-narrator's praise of the chieftain or king's bravery, glory, or virtuous generosity. In *Guide to Lord Murugan*, Nakkirar uses this older secular poetic genre to eulogise Murugan's beneficence, casting him in the role of



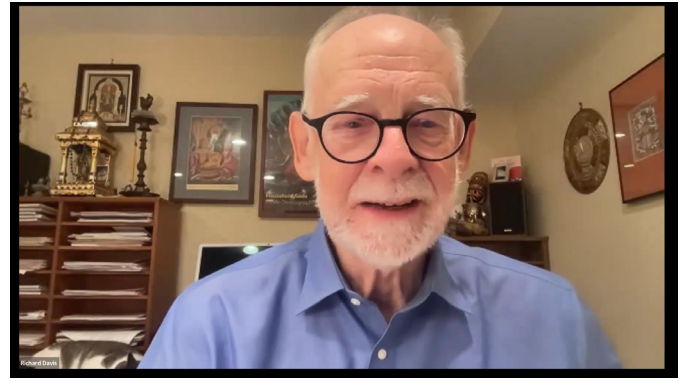
Yaksha worship "was a Bhakti cult, with images, temples, altars and offerings." It was "the natural source of the Bhakti elements common to the whole sectarian development" later taking place around the pan-Indian Hind deities Shiva and Vishnu.

the chieftain, the lord, the king, to whose bravery and munificence the poet-listener is introduced. Unlike earthly kings who ruled from a single seat of power, Murugan's six primary shrines locate him in specific but different devotional sites across the Tamil belt, (which interestingly do not fully correspond with the contemporary temples of the *Aarupadaveetukal*). The poet-narrator describes the six faces of the god and his twelve arms, and unequivocally mentions his two wives in different sections of the poem, which can be construed as an indication of, and perhaps even an argument for, the synthesis of the Tamil deity with Skanda. In one part of the poem, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva come to pay their respects to the warrior god, signalling Murugan's rising importance in the Hindu pantheon. The poem, observes Davis, reflects the simultaneity of Murugan's transcendence, and his ability to be in several different select places, especially in the *Kurinci* of the Tamil topography, effectively mapping his regional identity in early Sangam poetry.

A passage from Ramanujan's translation of the poem in his book, *Poems of Love and War*, foregrounds the primeval sensuality of Murugan worship among his tribal adherents. The daughter of a hill tribe, Mahavalli presumably, raises Murugan's cock banner, "chanting wordlessly her special chants". Muscular imagery

of animal slaughter pervades the poem as devotees make offerings of “soft white rice / mixed with the blood / of strong fattened large-footed rams”. It is an ecstatic and frenzied dance of devotion, suffused by a visceral rawness. The “threads of crimson” on the hill daughter’s wrists, yellow turmeric, red oleander, sandal fragrances, “big, cool garlands”, the music of instruments, “the roar of the waterfalls”, red flowers, and “fearful blood-smeared millet” cascade down in a thrilling rush of sights, sounds, and colours, till at last Murugan arrives, “and comes into her / to terrify enemies and deniers”, signalling to the reader the ancient and atavistic ritual of possession. Davis quotes Ramanujan’s commentary on the poem which says that Nakkirar evokes “the primal, the essential experience of bhakti, not ecstasy, not instasy, but an embodiment. That is neither a shamanic flight to the heavens or soul loss, nor a yogic autonomy, a withdrawal of the senses, but a partaking of the God”. This participation in the deity is a distinctive feature of Murugan worship. Davis points out that though Nakkirar advocates this way of apprehending and joining with Murugan, he stands outside the experience himself, merely acting as a guide leading another listener to the places where the latter can experience the god.

This gulf between the poet and complete immersion in the divine is bridged in the work



Dr. Richard Davis speaks during 'Murugan: Deity of Early Tamil Nadu'

of Vaishnava poet, Nammalvar, sourced in translation from A. K. Ramanujan’s *Hymns for the Drowning*, where he doesn’t merely describe the dwelling where Vishnu resides, but in effect becomes it. His head, sings the poet, “is the hill / of the lord’s gardens / the ocean of milk”, and his body, “the paradisaal dwelling place of Vishnu / Venkatam hill / cool and holy...”. By inscribing the presence of Vishnu within his own person, Nammalvar, says Davis, is simultaneously aware of the overarching transcendence of the deity, and his capacity to be present in multiple locations – including within the poet himself. He thus becomes the direct dwelling place of Vishnu. It speaks at once to the universalising and parochialising tendencies inherent in the bhakti tradition, where pan-Indian deities with a transcendent presence enjoy distinctively local and more intimate forms of worship from one region to the next. – L.V.

The History, Piety, and Performance of the Kolu Navaratri Rituals in South India

August 19th, 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)



Dr. Vasudha Narayanan speaks during 'The History, Piety, and Performance of the Kolu Navaratri Rituals in South India'

Navaratri offered a nuanced understanding of the festival’s genealogical, epistemological, and cultural significance across South India and within diasporic communities in the United States. Beginning with personal recollections of celebrating *kolu* abroad, Narayanan emphasised her “voice comes through the materials and also as a voice-over” that weaves together historical texts, personal and ethnographic observations, and contemporary digital expressions of the *kolu* festival.

Dr. Vasudha Narayanan’s lecture on the *kolu*

In the lecture’s first part, ‘Navaratri and Nostalgia:

Recreating Social Order, Reconstructing the Cosmos', Narayanan began with the Tamil lexicon that defines *kolu* as 'a royal presence or *darbar*', etymologically linked to the image of a king seated in a royal court. This definition, she noted, is crucial for the understanding of the festival's historical trajectory. At its core, *kolu* is a nine-tiered arrangement of dolls displayed during the *sarada* Navaratri, following the fortnight dedicated to ancestors (*pitr paksha*). This festival is celebrated across regions in South India under distinct names but the essence of the ritual remains consistent with the nine-tiered display of dolls and the regal connotation of *kolu* connected to the royal spectacles of the Vijayanagara empire.



Narayanan then traced the historical roots of *kolu* to the Vijayanagara empire. Drawing on travelogues from Nicolo Dei Conti (1420 CE), Abdur Razzak (1442 CE), Domingo Paes (1520 CE), and Fernao Nuniz (1536–37 CE), she highlighted descriptions of the Mahanavami festival and the king's tiered *dibba* at Hampi. These accounts underscored the regal origins of *kolu*, which over time was domesticated into household rituals and became deeply embedded in the domestic and public life of South Indians. Furthermore, the scholar situated *kolu* within Hindu mythological tradition by focusing on two charter myths: one linking the festival to Devi Durga's triumph over Mahishasura and another tied to the *Ayudha puja* of the *Mahabharata*. In this framing, Narayanan discerned both direct and indirect connections between death (*pitr paksha*) and creation, noting that the Durga's slaying of the water buffalo demon signifies a passage from death and disorder into creation, procreation, and recreation which the *kolu* festival embodies. This symbolic dimension, she remarked, is not

abstract but carried into lived ritual practice. *Kolu* arrangements are embedded in narratives and nostalgia about kings, deities, and demons. Building on this symbolism, the scholar turned to the social dimension of *kolu* celebration. Traditionally, women send invitations for '*kolu* hopping', where guests visit homes to admire displays and receive offerings such as *sundal*. However, in diasporic contexts, particularly in the United States, men have also become active participants, reflecting shifts in gendered roles within the *kolu* festival.

The royal and sacred symbolism of *kolu* is carried into its material culture, in which the figurines are crafted from clay drawn from the river Ganga, and the iconic *marappaci* dolls – depicting a king and queen – hold a central place, inaugurating the festival when placed upon the podium. Historically made in Panruti, Tamil Nadu, these figurines are now often manufactured abroad, including in China, raising questions of authenticity and continuity. Over the last two decades, Narayanan observed, the festival has changed drastically, with devotees now seeking scientific explanations for *kolu*'s symbolism. She highlighted resonances with global traditions, noting how *hinamatsuri* dolls in Japan are arranged in tiers and gifted to women upon marriage. Similarly, sandalwood *kolu* dolls (*marappaci pommali*) in South India are given to women as part of their trousseau.

From household rituals, Narayanan traced *kolu*'s expansion into the public sphere. Today, it has re-emerged as dance competitions, exhibitions, quizzes, and large-scale displays. In the second part of the lecture, 'Navaratri as a Site for Social Change', Narayanan examined the transformation of *kolu* into 'digital *kolu*', where blogs, YouTube tutorials, and televised segments on arranging dolls and preparing food have emerged. More strikingly, *kolu* has become a platform for social commentary, with dolls addressing issues such as gender equality, same-sex marriage, caste, and ecology. This reveals how *kolu* has become a site for engaging with contemporary social issues. Additionally, the scholar noted, in the diaspora *kolu* serves as a vehicle for instilling Hindu values and devotion among younger generations. Overall, the lecture unpacked the enduring vitality of *kolu* that bridges myth, memory, and modernity with divine presence. It is at once a

celebration of domestic piety, a performance of cultural memory, and a site for social change. – *H.S.*

Immersed in Vishnu: An Introduction to the Alvars

August 26th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Archana Venkatesan (Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Religious Studies at the University of California, Davis)



Dr. Archana Venkatesan speaks during 'Immersed in Vishnu: An Introduction to the Alvars'

Dr. Archana Venkatesan's lecture, 'Immersed in Vishnu: An Introduction to the *Alvars*', offers an important reorientation to the study of the *Alvars*, away from viewing them principally as religious saints and devotees of Vishnu, towards recognising them first as poets and appreciating the extraordinary richness in their poetry. She proposes three interconnected concepts that emerge from *Alvar* poetry: **place-making, self-making, and poetry-making**. The *Alvars* used poetry not simply to express devotion, but to construct sacred spaces, explore different forms of identity, and think about the nature of poetry itself.

The 12 *Alvars*, traditionally regarded as the foundational poet-saints of the Tamil Vaishnava tradition, composed intensely devotional poetry for Lord Vishnu in Tamil, approximately between the 7th and 9th centuries. Derived from the root 'al', meaning 'to be immersed', these 12 poets were called '*Alvars*' – those who are immersed in the devotion of Vishnu by later tradition. They came from varied social backgrounds including Brahmins, kings, chieftains, musicians, and a woman. Historical and biographical information about them is scant and is deeply intertwined with their later hagiography. Their poetry, therefore, is the principal source from where we can gather that these poets were erudite and learned in both Tamil poetry and Sanskrit literature, and were familiar with Puranic and Vedic traditions. Their

poems were collected into the *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, (Divine Collection of Four Thousand) around the 10th century, by Nathamuni, and the collection became central to the Tamil *Vaishnava* tradition.

Dr. Venkatesan argues that the *Alvars* were primarily exceptional literary figures. They became the early architects of this new literary tradition. Their poetry is remarkable, their language evocative, their imagination poignant, and their command of complex rhythmic patterns and metrical structures is impeccable. They deliberately emphasise that the quality of their Tamil, which was the language of high culture in South India, is beautiful, musical, and flawless. She challenges the idea that Bhakti poetry was simply a spontaneous religious expression. The intensity of the poems may appear immediate and emotionally impulsive, but this does not mean that they were produced without literary thought or poetic craft.

The *Alvars* built on the inheritance of Classical Tamil poetry but transformed it into Bhakti poetry. Classical Tamil poetry distinguished between *akam*, dealing with internal emotions and love, and *puram*, dealing with public life, kingship, and heroic action. The *Alvars* married these two modes together and so Vishnu could be described both as a powerful king and as an intimate beloved. As a result, the poetry ranges from the intimate, philosophical, introspective, sensual, and ecstatic to panegyric or didactic, making it difficult to classify within a single literary category.

Dr. Venkatesan argues that many scholars have classified these poems as autobiographical, since many of them are written in the first person and describe the poet's personal relationship with God. However, some verses also shift among multiple voices and rhetorical positions: the devotee may cajole, question, scold, reject, lament or long

for God. Some poets frequently adopt different voices and personas. The poet may speak as a heroine, friend, mother or cowherd maiden. The poetry creates a series of voices through which poetic identity and devotion are explored.



The *phalashruti*, the concluding verse of many compositions, makes this question of autobiography interesting. These verses often shift from first person into the third person, identify the poet, and describe the benefits of reciting the poem. The poet who spent the preceding verses describing himself as weak, sinful or unworthy may suddenly describe his own poetry in the *phalashruti* as flawless, excellent, and powerful, capable of leading people towards liberation. The *phalashruti* functions partly as biography, partly as commentary, and also as a claim of ownership over the poem.

Place-making was very important for the *Alvars*. The four major sites mentioned by many *Alvars* are Srirangam, Tirumaliruncolai, Tiruvenkatam, and Kacci (Kanchipuram). It was a way to assert the presence of God in the Tamil country. *Alvars* repeatedly place Vishnu within the Tamil landscape, turning geographical locations into sacred places. The idea of place-making is explored through the poetry of Tirumankai Alvar, a minor Chola king from the 9th century. Earlier poets list sacred sites through conventional descriptions of fertile paddy fields, rivers, fragrant grooves, and prosperous cities because God resides there. Tirumankai's engagement with place becomes much more systematic by organising sacred sites into sequences to resemble a geographical movement or a poetic pilgrimage. These sites came to be known as *Divya Desas* (Divine Places).

The discussion of Katal Mallai, present-day Mamallapuram, provides a particularly revealing example. Tirumankai describes a specific form of

Vishnu, *Sthalashayana*, reclining directly upon the ground by the sea, and insists that he has seen the deity himself. Dr. Venkatesan connects this description with the distinctive reclining Vishnu associated with the Shore Temple complex. She also proposes that Tirumankai may have been attempting to reclaim the *Vaishnava* identity of this sacred site in a changing religious and political landscape.

The idea of **self-making** is explored through the poetry of Antal, the only female poet among the 12 *Alvars*. She was extremely erudite and referred to herself as 'Kotai' in her work. Her poetry is complex and full of literary and theological allusions. What is interesting is that in her poems she presents her identity in a complex way.

In the *Tiruppavai*, Andal largely speaks through a collective 'we', adopting the voice of the *gopis*, which is a plural voice expressing joy, union, and God's presence. In the *Nacchiyar Tirumoli*, she more often uses a singular voice associated with longing, separation, grief, and absence. These two voices create a tension between individual and collective devotion, and between separation and union. The self that emerges is therefore not an unstable, shifting, and complex vision of who the poet is. Dr. Venkatesan describes it as shifting between different voices and emotional states. The question becomes not simply who Antal was historically, but what kind of self she created through her poetry.

The lecture finally turns to **Nammalvar** (Our *Alvar*) and the question of **poetry-making**. He refers to himself as '*Maran Sathkohan*'. His *phalashrutis* claim that his poems are beautiful and powerful, and that those who master them can reach God. But then he moves on to ask what the true duty of the poet is. He reprimands poets who waste their eloquence and craft on singing about kings and petty mortal men instead of the omnipotent, glorious God. The second distinction he makes is that poetry is not merely something the poet consciously creates. Instead, God enters the poet and uses him as an instrument to create precious verses. The poet becomes a vessel through which God expresses himself.

Being a poet is not simply about reaching God through the poetry one creates or being proficient enough to be a poet. It is about whether you are

capacious enough for God to enter within you and empty enough to become an instrument of God. The most striking idea emerging from the lecture is perhaps *Nammalvar's* final reversal:

the poet does not simply write about God; God becomes the poet. In that sense, the *Alvar* poetry becomes both an act of devotion and an act of creation. – *P.S.*

Southasian Painting

PAST PROGRAMMES

Unpacking the "Shangri" *Ramayana*

August 6th & 7th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Sonya Rhie Mace (The George P. Bickford Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art)

Session I: The Shangri *Ramayana*: Histories and Historiographies

The first session of the two-part lecture series by Dr. Sonya Rhie Mace on the Shangri *Ramayana* began by addressing the origins of the name 'Shangri *Ramayana*', derived from a place near Kullu in Himachal Pradesh in modern-day India, and the history of its identification and publication. Rather than treating the series as a single, unified, artistic production, Mace suggested that it comprised approximately 650–1,000 paintings, produced by different artists working in more than twelve workshops across several Pahari kingdoms.



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

The lecture began by delineating the major tranches of what eventually comprised the Shangri *Ramayana*. Dr. Mace highlighted how the saga began with the efforts of scholar M.S. Randhawa, who, with the help of Raja Raghubir Singh of Kullu, published some 270 Shangri paintings in a monograph titled '*Basohli Painting*' (1959). Although an important first step, this was factually incorrect since Shangri and Basohli were not only located far away from each other, but their painting styles were also vastly different. Raja Raghubir sold these paintings later and these have since travelled into collections all over the world – San Diego, Reitberg, Cleveland, New Delhi, Virginia – leading to decades of efforts by various scholars to locate, identify, and distinguish the different styles of painting found in the Pahari region and used in creating the Shangri *Ramayana*.

Another significant contribution to identifying Pahari painters was by Professors B.N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer in their book titled '*Pahari Masters*' (1992). Mace discussed how Goswamy and Fischer identified two distinct styles (for the sake of convenience called 'Style 1' and 'Style 2') in the first two books of the *Ramayana*. They proposed that these paintings were produced in the tiny Pahari court of Bahu where painters from Nurpur had been hired. Eventually, the

Ramayana travelled to Mandi and Kullu where the subsequent books were illustrated up until the 18th century. Mace also highlighted Steven Kosack's work on the painter Devidasa of Nurpur which strengthened Goswamy and Fischer's hypothesis that Pahari kings hired painters from different regions to produce paintings for them – thus Pahari painting styles could never be categorised into neat boxes based on region of patron.

However, about two decades later, Alka Bagri, in her groundbreaking Ph.D. thesis, 'The Illustrations of the Shangri *Ramayana*: Early Court Painting in the Punjab Hills' (unpublished) argued that the Shangri *Ramayana* consisted of more than 270 paintings which were not only produced in about a dozen workshops spread across the Pahari region, but were also, within one workshop, created by multiple artists (who were categorised in tiers based on their skill). However, the fact that one seldom finds any overlaps in the illustrated scenes, along with a consistent inventory, Mace reasoned, points to coordination between workshops across regions in creating this album. The first session ended with a discussion on the possible dates for creating this album. Mace placed the Shangri *Ramayana* somewhere between 1650s–1740s, at c.1700, with nearly six years of continuous work. While 'Style 1' and 'Style 2' seen in the illustrations of the first two books of the six-book epic are the most superior, the finesse slackens by Book 3, and many illustrations thereafter are incomplete.

Session II: Individual or Collective? Locating Meaning and Value in a Pictorial Series

The second day of the session was a targeted case study of two styles found in the Shangri *Ramayana*. For the lack of nomenclature, Dr. Mace labelled the first case study 'Mandiali Workshop'. A hundred and twenty folios were created in this style, with six scenes from Book 2 and a hundred and fourteen scenes from Book 3 of the *Ramayana*. Dr. Mace further shared how there are no unfinished paintings in this style. The paintings are ordered and well labelled even if a couple of folios are missing in between. The scenes closely adhere to Valmiki's text, with no interpolations by the artist. Some examples include scenes from Rama's exile – in Chitrakoot, in Shabri's abode, the altercation with the demoness Taraka. Mace

poignantly highlighted the mood of the scenes – strokes of yellow used to highlight the calm victory of Rama over Taraka's brother King Khara as Sita quietly admires him, in sheer contrast to the angst of Taraka who is seen weeping as she looks over heaps of corpses including Khara's in the immediate folio that follows. The Mandiali Workshop's last folio is also the most dramatic and splendid – for it depicts the court of Ravana, its lavishness symbolised by its pronounced use of gold.

This was followed by the next case study on 'Style 1' Workshop, called the '1st Bahu Master' by Goswamy and Fischer, and 'Artist B' by Kosack. Twenty-five folios were found to be created in this style – six from Book 1 and nineteen from Book 2 of the *Ramayana*.



Unlike the 'Mandiali Workshop', several paintings in this workshop lack folio numbers in Takri/Devanagari; almost no inscription accompanies many of the paintings which, Dr. Mace shared, made it difficult for scholars to caption scenes correctly. She shared an instance of how one painting (now in the A.O. Bellak Collection, USA) was initially thought to have depicted Bharata and Shatrughna leaving their grandfather's place but has by subsequent scholarship been recaptioned 'Dasaratha Imagines His Son Returning'. Furthermore, the uniformity seen in the previous workshop is missing here: artists have experimented extensively. In contrast to the Mandiali Workshop, there are several inconsistencies also in the numbering of the folios. Mace attributed this error to the fact that often similar scenes were drawn at the same time by the same hands, even if the scene occurred at different points of time in the story (for instance, the fight scenes). The session ended with a discussion on 'Extra Valmiki Subjects' – illustrations which Valmiki does not mention in the text but nonetheless occur in the Shangri

Ramayana. Mace listed various examples: Sita at the brink of death due to starvation in Ravana's abode as celestial food is brought to her by Indra on Rama's request; and Bharata visiting his uncle. This, Dr. Mace highlighted, shows how patrons and artists of the Shangri *Ramayana* were aware of other versions of the epic and were keen to showcase them in the album. The lecture was followed by a detailed question-answer session. The most interesting thread was on the source and significance of colour used in the paintings. Dr. Mace shared her insights on how yellow was obtained by drying cow urine. The colour was



Dr. Sonya Rhie Mace speaks during 'Unpacking the "Shangri" Ramayana'

enhanced by feeding the cows mango leaves, she concluded. - **C.J.**

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

On Beauty: Western Thought from Antiquity to the Enlightenment

PAST PROGRAMMES

Beauty as a Bridge Between the Sensible and the Intelligible in Plato

August 11th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Frisbee Sheffield (Associate Professor in Classics, and a Fellow of Downing College, Cambridge)



Prof. Frisbee Sheffield speaks during 'Beauty as a Bridge Between the Sensible and the Intelligible in Plato'

The Greek concept of 'to kalon', though often translated as 'beauty', has a range of meanings that go far beyond what we might think of as the 'narrowly aesthetic'. Because of this, it is also often translated as 'fine' or 'noble'.

This term applies not just to art, or even bodily beauty — our 'narrowly aesthetic' sense of beauty — but to actions, to characters, and to the cosmos itself. Thus, *kalon* has a central role to play in the ethical thought of Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, virtues are beautiful. Thus, a virtue such as courage is not only beautiful, but '*kalliston*', one of the most beautiful things.

This is the first feature of Plato's beauty — 'to kalon' has too capacious a meaning.

It produces two issues. The first is that given this capacious meaning, beauty is not distinguishable from 'ethics' or the moral good. So '*kalon*' as a word moves between the domain of the aesthetic and the ethical. But Professor Sheffield believes

that this is not really an issue, and that it might be our impoverished idea of what beauty is today that makes us unable to slip into the Greek idea of *kalon*.

The second issue, for Plato, is that beauty is tethered to desire. Why is this a problem? If beauty is tethered to desire, it becomes tethered to spontaneously given inclinations, subjective desires, and preferences. The worry is that judgements on beauty will then not be comparable to, say, judgements on justice or goodness — and thus, cannot be held up for philosophical reflection. We need a characterisation of beauty about which we can be right or wrong.

This is why certain kinds of thinkers want to expunge 'desire' — and with it, any taint of self-interest or Kantian 'partiality' from the appreciation of art, because it threatens the aesthetic judgement.

The second feature is Plato's transformative idea of beauty. Why does beauty create desire — the feeling that our lives would not be worth living without them? Because, in Plato's framing, it is transformative, and leads to eudaimonia or happiness. It can only do so if we are able to capture its value and make it our own in some way — hence our attempts at creative expression in the presence of beauty. We want to recreate or reproduce in the presence of beauty.

The third feature is a monism about beauty — there is one property of 'beautiful' that exists in

a beautiful thought, a beautiful law, a beautiful person, a beautiful landscape. How does one get there?

Plato describes someone moving beyond sensible examples of beauty that change over time – subject to change and decay, beautiful in one respect and not in another – towards a beauty whose nature is single, pure, changeless, and divine, and the source of value for its various manifestations – the monism.

One way to capture the connection between beauty and goodness is to say that *kalon* is how the goodness of a thing, be it a body, poem, painting, or law, appears to us. As one scholar has put it, a thing's being *kalon* is the "shining forth of the thing's nature. It is the splendid virtue of appearance". Things are beautiful insofar as they convey rational order, which is what harmony ultimately manifests. This is why Plato thought beauty is essential to education.

For Plato, the order of explanation is as follows: because something is good, it appears beautiful; and because it is beautiful, it will be pleasing.

When we see a beautiful human body, we see a divine ideal. For Plato, seeing the ideal in the other, seeing them in the mode of beauty, is to see the real nature of the other person. Thus, love plays a pivotal role in moral education – may we see each other in the mode of beauty. When we idealise the other by seeing them as beautiful, that is the engine of moral development. As you seek to be worthy of that love, it calls you to be a better version of yourself. That is what we must maintain in our romantic relationships.

Plato conceives of the soul as that thing mediating between the sensible world and the intelligible world of ideas. It exists before incarnation, in the intelligible realm where it encounters ideas of beauty, justice, and goodness. When the soul enters the body, it forgets many of these ideas. Crucially, though, it is capable of recollecting these experiences. So, when we see beauty in the sensible realm – persons, paintings, laws, and practices – we have a sensible experience of what we grasped intelligibly, before incarnation. We don't just recollect the form of beauty, but our own god-like nature which saw the form of beauty in the 'celestial circuit'. – **P.P.**

Beauty and the Virtuous Agent in Aristotle

August 13th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Frisbee Sheffield (Associate Professor in Classics, and a Fellow of Downing College, Cambridge)

There is discomfort with the phrase 'to *kalon*' because modern conception tries to distinguish aesthetic value from other kinds of value, for instance, moral value. For Aristotle, as with Plato, this word packed a range – referring to literary and artistic works, animals in the biological world, and virtuous agents.

And the reason that 'fine' is preferred as a translation of *kalon* is because Aristotle is suggesting we should think that the virtuous agent acts for the sake of the beautiful, understood as some characteristic that we would also ascribe to a painting or a sunset.

What, then, does it mean to say that the virtuous agent acts for the sake of the beautiful?

For Aristotle, *kalon* is the goal of virtuous action

– it is why the courageous person acts the way they act, and the temperate person acts the way they do.

There are two broad reasons to find Aristotle's '*kalon*' difficult as the goal of virtuous action.

The first problem is that *kalon* is used in many ways. When we call an animal '*kalon*' and a house '*kalon*', we are not predicating the same property for both. So, we need to be sensitive to the context in which the word '*kalon*' is used. (This is anti-Platonist, for Plato notes that things are beautiful because of one form or idea, beauty itself.)

The second problem is the following: firstly, there is a tradition of thinking that beauty is principally a cause of pleasure in the perceiver/thinker and that therefore anyone motivated to act by beauty

is perhaps

(a) motivated in an egoist fashion (since we experience only our own pleasures) or, failing that, is perhaps

(b) motivated not because of the good but just because of the pleasant.

Secondly, there is a tradition, principally associated with Kant, that beauty has to do with the generation of pleasure but which wants to specify that it is the generation of a particular kind of pleasure, namely disinterested pleasure, by which is meant a kind of pleasure that is not at all motivational.

So if the *kalon* has value insofar as it generates pleasure, then this will not be a good explanation of how the *kalon* might be the goal of virtuous action.

How, then, does the *kalon* motivate the agent and to what end?

There are times when the context makes manifest the qualities of a person — nobility, courage, and greatness of soul, for example —

that would otherwise not be evident, though in fact those qualities are still there. One can see that someone is courageous when they are called upon to stand up to some kind of danger, when and how they bear misfortune. Here, the *kalon* “shines through”.

For Aristotle, the chief forms of beauty are order, symmetry, and definiteness — these make things beautiful, objectively speaking. But just because, say, a mathematical proof possesses this beauty, does not mean it is ‘good’. So, for Aristotle, not all things beautiful are good.

To sum up, *kalon* is connected to the goodness of character, but this is a goodness of character made manifest in a way that is open to view and which causes pleasure to behold. In this way, it retains its connection to beauty in the narrower modern sense. But there is nothing superficial or cosmetic about this. Nor does the agent in question act in order to be recognised publicly, or for the sake of pleasure. The virtuous agent chooses their actions for the sake of that *kalon*, and to manifest a ‘mean state’ that exhibits order, symmetry, and definiteness. – **P.P.**

The Stoics on Beauty and Art

August 25th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Aistė Čelkytė (Associate Professor of Philosophy at Vilnius University, Lithuania)

The school

Stoa Poikilē, Agora, Athens



- Founder: Zeno of Citium (334-261 BCE);
- The school is usually divided into three periods: the early Stoa, the middle Stoa and Roman Stoicism.

A layered excursion by Dr. Aistė Čelkytė into Stoicism, one of the three philosophical systems that emerged in Hellenistic Greece, alongside Epicureanism and Scepticism, led to some interesting questions on the nature of beauty. Named after the Stoa Poikile, the colonnaded marketplace in Agora, Athens, where it was founded by Zeno of Citium, and further solidified

by Cleanthes of Assos and Chrysippus of Soli, Stoicism is broadly categorised into three historical periods: the Early Stoa, the Middle Stoa, and Roman Stoicism. The movement spans roughly 600 hundred years (300 BCE–300 CE), but Dr. Čelkytė chose the development of the doctrine during the Early Stoa as the springboard from which to dive into its formative ideas on beauty. She also explored some of these developmental principles through practical concepts discussed by the Roman Stoics. The philosophy, she says, was as radical and anti-establishment in its time as it was normative and conventional in others. Its touchstone was no doubt Plato’s Theory of Forms, which shaped crucial aspects of the Stoic worldview, against which other facets of its dogma were pitted.

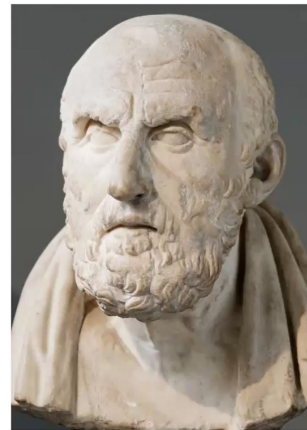
The principal Stoic tenets are located in what

Dr. Celkyte calls a “coherent and interlocking system of ideas” within the silos of physics (the study of nature), logic (the study of reason and knowledge), and ethics (the study of the path to happiness). It is through the first and last of these silos that she examined their aesthetics. Stoic metaphysics rejects Plato’s emphasis on the immateriality of the Form – a transcendent blueprint which animates corresponding material objects in everyday reality, bringing life and order to the universe. The Stoics argued that such Forms, by virtue of their existence in an eternal and changeless realm, were fundamentally incapable of interacting with or transforming material objects in this world. Instead, their philosophy underscored the corporeality of life. “Everything that exists is material; is a body,” explains Dr. Celkyte. The Stoics embraced the causality inherent in Plato’s thought, but in their unreservedly materialist schema, all life was a product of “matter acting on matter”. God was the Active Principle in this conception, who breathed life into inert matter or the Passive Principle. This interaction between the two Principles also accounts for the elements of nature, namely earth, fire, air, and water. Such a God was, by extension, also immanent, imbuing every object – animate and inanimate – with *pneuma*, a life-breath generated by air and fire.

As a material life force that pervaded all matter, God was an active agent, a sculptor, shaping and chiselling the world into a cohesive and interconnected cosmic system. This universe was to be viewed as “one living being, having one substance and one soul,” writes the Roman emperor and noted Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations*, where “all things are the cooperating causes of all things that exist”. Scholars suggest that Stoic metaphysics is inspired by the Demiurge in Plato’s *Timaeus*. God’s material presence as the master craftsman of such congruent and ceaseless design was evident in what Aurelius refers to as “the continuous spinning of the thread and the structure of the web”. Causal determinism is one of the cornerstones of Stoic philosophy. There is nothing random about the intermeshing of Active and Passive matter. The Stoic God, says Dr. Celkyte, presides over the world order, dictating and regulating its functioning. It is a causal nexus, the *logos* or logic of which is underpinned by rationality and universal good. The Roman author

and grammarian, Aulus Gellius, calls it a “natural everlasting ordering of the whole” where one set of events follows another in a predetermined and inviolable unity.

The ethics of Stoic philosophy are apparent in its more practical and purposive drive towards happiness. The *telos* or goal of human life is to live in agreement with our universal nature, which, by definition, says Dr. Celkyte, means following the *logos* or rationality. In doing so, we



walk the path of virtue. The most profound and transformative spiritual happiness can be achieved through the pursuit and practice of wisdom, which also encompasses values like justice and courage. Anything that does not inform a person’s moral character and

righteousness, on the other hand, is classified as *adiaphoros* or indifferent. Thus, seemingly desirable criteria like money, success, reputation, health, pleasure, and physical attractiveness are deemed neutral and inconsequential – as having no impact on human happiness. In the *Stoic Paradoxes*, the Roman statesman and philosopher, Cicero, underscores the extraneity of such standards to a virtuous life. “No man who is wholly consistent within himself, and reposes all his interests in himself alone,” he writes, “can be otherwise than completely happy.” True happiness can only be found in the ceaseless improvement of one’s inner self, typified in Stoic philosophy by the sage: a veritable model of wisdom.

However, making wisdom the exclusive preserve of the sage exposes the fault lines in the doctrine. Suddenly, happiness appears remote and inaccessible to ordinary human life with its mundane foibles and failings. The Stoics insist, meanwhile, that the spiritual journey is not as straightforward as it seems. “Even though it is in our nature to live in agreement with virtue, we are also prone to stray from that path,” says Dr. Celkyte. Human beings are broadly assigned four personae or masks in Stoic thought, an idea first propounded by the philosopher, Panaetius, corresponding with our universal rational

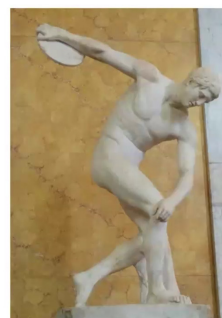
nature, our individual traits and proclivities, our personality as shaped by external factors, and the way of life we actively choose for ourselves. These masks signify the constant tensions in operation between the universality of our rational nature and the individual desires that draw us towards indifferent values. We may grasp prudently that virtue is good, moral, and right, says Dr. Celkyte, but veer towards the profitable or beneficial alternative in everyday life. In doing so, we cognitively assent to false judgement, or make the wrong decision, our minds clouded by *pathos* or emotions like pain, pleasure, fear, and desire. The Stoics borrow from Socrates's view that false knowledge – the belief that we know more than we really do – is worse than the most treacherous ignorance, and acts as a barrier to our pursuit of wisdom.

In *The Republic*, Plato says that in much the same way that a physical ailment afflicts the body, excessive and unregulated sentiment can bedevil the mind. If emotion is illness, seeing as it derives from cognitive error, the cure or *therapeia* can be found in the restorative powers of philosophy, according to the Stoics, which can reinstate psychic harmony and balance. It can lead to *apatheia* or the riddance of destructive emotions and, eventually, *eupatheia*, feelings of well-being brought on by reclaiming healthy, universal, rational values. A wise man experiences feelings too, explains Dr. Celkyte, but he has a constructive connection with those feelings, enabling the pursuit of virtue. The Stoics believe that one need only to look at nature for instances of self-preservation. Like infant mammals who subordinate the pleasurable to the process of survival in their environments, we too are possessed of an inherent tendency to privilege good and virtuous action over enjoyable but indifferent diversions.

Beauty, as an end itself, in the Stoic scheme of things, is an *adiaphoros*. It has no bearing on whether we live a happy life. But the beauty of the natural and cosmic world certainly suggests to them that God does indeed shape it, intentionally and rationally. It is evidenced, says Cicero in *On the Nature of Gods*, in the “uniform motion and revolution of the heavens, and the varied groupings and ordered beauty of the sun, moon, and stars”, none of which could be explained away as “the mere effect of chance”. This focus

on uniformity and orderliness presupposes the restrained Stoic aesthetic. The philosopher, Arius Didymus, explains the crucial role that such design equilibrium plays in the physical and spiritual realms. “Just as the beauty of a body is the proportionality of limbs when they relate to each other and the whole,” he writes, “so too the beauty of the soul is the proportionality of *logos* and its parts when they relate to the whole of the soul and to each other.”

The operative term in the metaphysics of beauty is proportionality, achieved through rational and intentional effort. Polycleitus, a 5th-century-BCE sculptor, used the term ‘*summetria*’ to explain, with mathematical precision, the proportions of the



‘Myron [the sculptor] was rendered more particularly famous by his statue of a heifer... Myron appears to have been the first to give a varied development to the art, having made a greater number of designs than Polycleitus, and shown more attention to *summetria*. And yet, though he was very accurate in the proportions of his figures, he has neglected to give expression.’

Pliny the Elder *Nat.* 34.19

human body, in his treatise, *Canon*. He believed harmonious sculptural beauty can be achieved through the proportioning of human body parts in specific ratios to each other and to the whole. These ideas were developed further by the Athenian sculptor from the same period, Myron of Eleutherae, through his famous *Discobolus* or *Discus Thrower*, a sculpture exemplifying the unity of athletic beauty, proportion, and movement. In the 4th century BCE, the sculptor, Lyssippos, is known to have made significant contributions to the art of statuary, by “expressing the details of the hair, and by making the head smaller than had been done by the ancients, and the body more graceful and less bulky”, which made his statues appear taller, says Dr. Celkyte. So elegantly did he reduce the “squareness observable in ancient statues”, comments Pliny the Elder of Lysippos's work, that while other artists sculpted men “as they actually were”, he made them “as they appeared to be”. The idea of proportionality and balance is also available in the Roman architect and military engineer, Vitruvius's multivolume treatise, *De Architectura*, the principles of which were distilled, fifteen centuries later, into Leonardo da Vinci's iconic *The Vitruvian Man*, thereby seamlessly amalgamating the knowledge of anatomy with that of geometry and philosophy.

The properties of harmony and proportionality, so valued by the Stoics, is epitomised in the sage. He is beautiful because he embodies wisdom. This is consistent and coherent with the Stoic worldview, says Dr. Celkyte. The beauty of the body may be defined by its proportionality; the parts, however, have to be well-balanced with each other and with the whole. It therefore encompasses the sum and substance of human life: the body and the soul. In order to assimilate true beauty within our beings, we must strive to be harmonious with our universal, rational nature; and to embrace our innate purposiveness which can lead us down the path of virtue. Beauty is thus proportionality in accordance with nature, she explains. It is in virtue that we can seek to find beauty. Physical beauty is indifferent, and does not help manifest deeper spiritual probity. The beauty of the soul, on the other hand, builds moral character and produces deep psychic happiness.

Do the Stoics then believe beauty is not a worthy pursuit since beautiful things are unlikely to bring us abiding happiness? Dr. Celkyte says that is far from true. On the contrary, they consider art a practical tool in the pursuit of virtue. It may not be the *telos* in and of itself, but its stress on proportionality and congruence makes it a



useful instrument in the cultivation of the long-term equilibrium of the soul. Chrysippus advanced the idea that lullabies provide calming melodies that can harmonise and assuage anxious emotional states in early childhood. The philosopher and poet,

Philodemus, accentuates the benefits of musical rhythms in helping children grow “attentive and generally perceptive” through its “cognate virtues”. Dr. Celkyte reminds us that musical training was a vital aspect of education among the ancient Greeks. The universal balance found in music could seamlessly be transposed to that of virtue, making it the perfect vehicle for the cultivation of harmonious thought. Its benefits could easily extend to adult life where poetry and



Prof. Aistė Čelkytė speaks during 'The Stoics on Beauty and Art'

music might be instrumental in fostering harmony and proportionality. Besides, adds Philodemus, though philosophical prose imparts knowledge sufficiently, it “lacks expressions appropriate to the grandeur of the divine”. In contrast, the metres, melodies, and rhythms found in musical compositions come “closest to the truth of the contemplation of the gods”.

Even Cleanthes, who succeeded Zeno as the second head of the Stoic school of philosophy, chose to exalt the spirit of divine reason through a 39-line hexameter poem, *Hymn to Zeus*. It is a testament to the authority of art and beauty in transmitting deeper ideals within what is no doubt an intrinsically moral framework. Only the sage, in the Stoic view, can truly enjoy artistic pursuits like music, literature, and sculpture owing to his focus on rationality and balance in body and soul. We may employ the arts as a tool, but must always be alert to our emotional responses to them. There is a difference between being motivated by beauty and using it instrumentally. The arts as expressions of beauty may be vital to the Stoic way of life, concludes Dr. Celkyte, but only as a means to a higher end – virtue. The beauty of the soul implies a clear pathway to God, whose abundant creation of the world signifies the ultimate artist. – **L.V.**

Curatorial Processes

PAST PROGRAMMES

Reuniting a *Ramayana*

July 30th, 2026, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Dr. Sonya Rhie Mace (George P. Bickford Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art)

Dr. Sonya Rhie Mace presented the story of the first-ever exhibition of the Shangri *Ramayana* series, and shared her three-year-long journey of curating the 40 paintings that made up the exhibit in the Focus Gallery at The Cleveland Museum of Art. The exhibition celebrates the publication of the Catherine Glynn Benkaim and Ralph Benkaim Collection of Pahari paintings, and is titled 'Epic of the Northwest Himalayas, Pahari Paintings from the Shangri *Ramayana*'.

The story of the exhibition coming together and the thoughtfully curated display appears to mirror both the layered narrative of the *Ramayana* itself and the multiple layers of burnished pigments that make up these exquisite paintings. Just as the paintings are created collectively by a multitude of artists, so also was the exhibition a collective effort of multiple museums (Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, Cincinnati Art Museum, and The Cleveland Museum of Art), curators, scholars, and lenders who generously contributed from their private collections.

The general introduction to this exhibition is provided by the sister installation in The Cleveland Museum of Art's permanent collection galleries. It illustrates the idea of dispersed narratives, their royal patronage, the shared visual language across different media, and sizes of Pahari paintings.

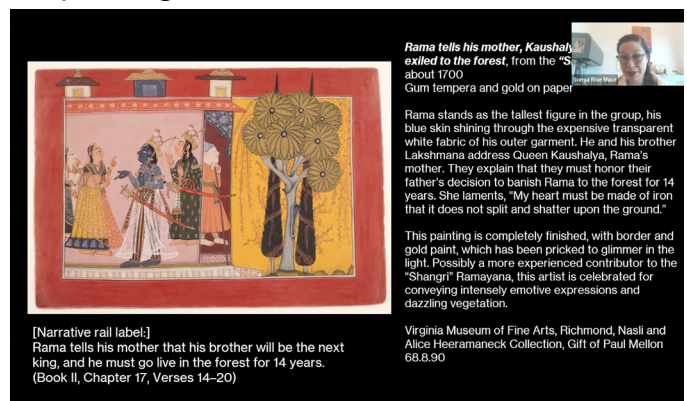
Dr. Rhie Mace started her presentation by acknowledging Sarang Sharma and his father Padma Shri Vijay Sharma for their support and guidance during her research in putting together the 40 paintings of the exhibit and 90 paintings of the catalogue. She travelled with Sarang

Sharma across the Pahari kingdoms of Nurpur, Mandi, Basohli, Bahu, and Kangra to study the scant primary sources about the artist families of the region.

Learning Goals of the Exhibition

The exhibition invites visitors to reflect on how modern collecting and display practices shape our understanding of serial works, and what is gained or lost when portions are separated from the whole. Its learning goals include exploring Pahari cultural practices around commissioning a *Ramayana* as an act of religious merit and understanding the collaborative regional artistic styles unique to the Pahari tradition. To make it relevant for contemporary audiences, the *Ramayana* series was framed as the original graphic novel, with a superhero narrative.

Dr. Rhie Mace advocated for an interesting intervention of two-part labels to help meet these learning goals. One with a 100-word limit is the main didactic that explains the artistic and cultural nuances of each painting. The second is a simple one-line narrative on a rail below the paintings to give a synopsis of the *Ramayana* so visitors can connect the storyline with each of the paintings.



Curating the 40 paintings for the exhibition

Dr. Rhie Mace spoke about the various considerations that influenced her choice of the 40 paintings selected from among the 90 in the Benkaim collection and those borrowed and acquired from other sources. One was to select paintings that represent the complete story of the *Ramayana*. Another was to include paintings from sequential visual narratives to emphasise how they intensify the dramatic climaxes when viewed together. She also highlighted her criteria of including a complete representation of all the different painting styles across 15 different artist workshops in various regional styles. A more pragmatic concern was juggling available budgets which prevented her from including paintings from Europe and Asia on account of insurance and logistics costs, or in the case of New York, prohibitive taxes. The exhibition also used acquisition funds to purchase three paintings including *Sita Seeing the Golden Deer*.

For the central painting of the gallery, Dr. Rhie Mace selected the scene of the introduction of Ravana, where Shurpanakha has had her ears and nose cut off by Lakshmana and demands Ravana avenge her humiliation. Among other reasons, she highlighted the extensive use of gold in the painting which gave it a dramatic edge from a visual and narrative standpoint.



The other painting in focus was of Vishwamithra teaching Rama and Lakshmana, which features on the cover of the publication and the entrance of the gallery. It highlights the 'first adventure' of Rama and Lakshmana as they accompany the sage who teaches them to enchant their arrows, giving them superhuman powers to fight demons.

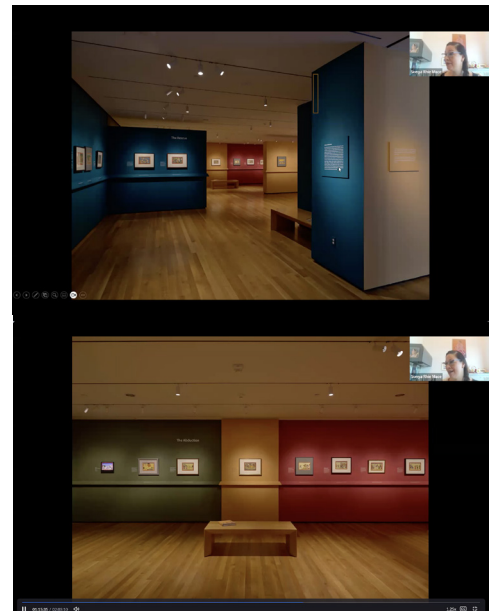
Design of the exhibit

The Focus Gallery, where the paintings were displayed, use colour, high resolution

graphic blow-ups, space divided into different environments, and digital animations to highlight the beauty and detail of these miniature yet magnificent masterpieces.



The first gallery has marigold or saffron-yellow walls to represent the golden years of the childhood of Rama and his brothers. The second section, titled 'The Promise', has red walls to represent the arresting and pivotal scenes of Kaikeyi activating Dasharatha's promise to crown her son Bharata and send Rama to exile. It shows paintings of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana in the forest, in exile until the Shurpanakha episode. The third section has deep olive-green walls, and is titled 'The Abduction', showing Sita's kidnapping by Ravana, and Rama's search for her in the forest. The last gallery is titled 'The Rescue' and has deep teal walls, showing the battle scenes between the armies of Rama and Ravana. The exhibit doesn't include any paintings of the slaying of Ravana, or the triumphal return of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana to Ayodhya, as these were never located, presumed lost in the mists of time. In their place is a large-scale blow-up from one of the paintings with just panels that explain how the *Ramayana* ends with Sita and Rama's coronation.



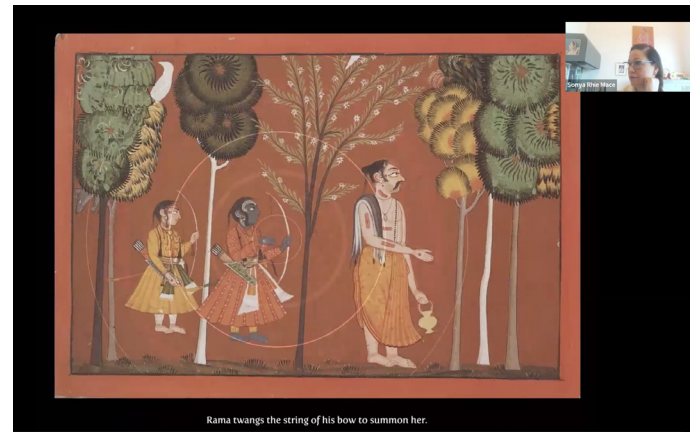
A rather lovely curatorial touch is a dramatis personae on one wall, introducing the characters of the Shangri Ramayana in order of appearance, with details taken from paintings in the exhibition.



Animations to enhance the exhibits

To highlight the orchestral and symphonic quality of viewing these pictorial series, the exhibition also includes three digital animations. These are interspersed among the paintings on a screen that is the same size as the paintings themselves. They contain paintings both in and outside the exhibition. There is no voiceover, and a minimal soundtrack that predominantly uses environmental sounds. The background elements, like rivers or trees, and the characters are subtly animated to enhance the mood of the paintings and add details to the narrative that might be missing from the paintings on display.

These animations depict three episodes. First, of Rama and Lakshmana's first adventure killing the demons that disturbed Vishwamitra's *ashram*. The second is of Sita seeing the Golden Deer and her subsequent abduction by Ravana. The third is the battle scene where Rama and Lakshmana are attacked by Indrajeet's snake arrows and recover with Garuda's help to resume fighting.



In closing

The exhibition enacts the very question it poses to its visitors: what is gained, and what is irretrievably lost, when the pieces of a serial work are scattered across the world and across centuries? Each of the paintings is an individual treasure, but their meaning deepens, as do the emotions they evoke, when viewed together – an aching melody as fragments of a symphony that echo through the centuries. – **S.R.**

SLANT/STANCE

Puja, Poetry, Performance: Enduring Bhakti Traditions of the Indian Subcontinent

I was beginning to feel it would be best not to settle down in areas recognisably Parisian, because places recognisably themselves tend to be fictitious.

- Amit Chaudhuri, *Chateau Rouge*, 2026

In August 2026, Jnanapravaha Mumbai conducted a four-part lecture series that delved into the enduring approaches to devotion in the historic Tamil-speaking region of the Indian subcontinent. The study of these richly constructed practices was organised around four major divinities of pan-Indic resonance: Shiva, Skanda-Murugan, Vishnu, and Devi. Each of these beings has generated polyphonic webs of inter-regional activity that co-relates ritualistic observances, visual and poetic manifestation, song, dance, and dramatic performance. All of these testify, variously, to intimate relationships between sensorily engaged human devotees and deities whose divine reality is simultaneously omniscient and immanent in the created world.

As seen below, the phenomenon of bhakti is structured by the multivalent nature of *inter-actions*.

Practice, Praxis: Introducing the term 'Bhakti'

The presence of divinity in local habitations – as embodied in geological formations such as rocks and trees, in sculptural anthropomorphic forms for domestic 'use', in diminutive shrines that cohere with natural landscapes, or presiding in state within elaborate architectural temples – is an elementary aspect of devotional activity. It relates ritual offering, oblation, and recitation, as well as expressions of supplication and adoration, with the sighting (*darshana*) of transcendental substance.

As Prof. Richard H. Davis notes in his magnum opus *Religions of Early India: A Cultural History*, artistically dexterous stone sculptures of supernal beings such as *yakshas* and *yakshis*, *nagas* and *naginis* "are among the very earliest extant freestanding figural sculptures in the subcontinent"¹. Archaeological studies date these remnants to the dynastic period of the Shungas (c. 200 BCE-0 CE), who presided over the north-eastern Gangetic belt as successors of the Mauryan empire. These objects did not organise a literary culture – oral or written – around themselves, and modern scholarship has identified them with folk and rural devotional cults, implicitly in contradistinction to 'sophisticated' forms of urban worship that are filtered through literary acumen.

Such deities were venerated in *chaityas* or *devayatanas* (shrines) "located either inside a city or outside, often under a tree considered sacred to the deity. An essential feature of the shrine was a stone table or altar. Some *chaityas*, but not all, featured anthropomorphic images of the deities, like Kubera Yaksha of Vidisha. Both aniconic and iconic forms of veneration were possible"². Literary evidence from Buddhist texts and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* registers their presence within principal northern Indian cities of this period and as tutelary deities guarding over human settlements; these sources thereby defuse ideological boundaries between 'literate' and 'popular' yet marginalised modes of worship.

The images were duly honoured with flowers, even with incense, food, and cloth; this was unaccompanied by formal recitations and priestly mediation. The divine recipient was made visible and present in material form and received the offerings from their worshippers directly. Significantly, these deities, who in their monumental anthropomorphic conceptions possess tall and virile (male)

or voluptuous (female) forms and are often regally dressed and ornamented, radiate “health and abundance, associated with the fertile productivity of nature”.³ As such, they were consistently propitiated for securing worldly prosperity in terms of health, spouses, offspring, and economic wealth.

These locally entrenched figures were unpredictable personas, and so a gracious response to the homage they received was uncertain; often, they were perceived as malevolent forces that must be appeased to avert misfortune, though, when pleased, they could be powerful helpmates in navigating the rigours of earthly existence. In all, devotion to them is characterised by *mutual participation* between the inextricable material and abstract realities of the divine and the human.

As such, in relation to the polyvalent, pan-regional devotional orientations towards personal deities such as Shiva and Vishnu, these beings may be called ‘semi-divine’ to recognise their considerable immaterial and grounded agency as partaking of a created universe. Davis refers to them as ‘earthly deities’, “to remind us of their grounded physical presence”⁴. Their veneration persists, historically and contemporaneously, as characteristic of devotion, in angularity to practices of temple worship with which they may be integrated. They are neither paradigmatic of nor subsumed within the complex, integrative proclivities of later devotional forms.

The *Bhagavad Gita* participates in and provides a counterpoint to ‘earthy’ practices of veneration, rather than performing their historical ‘continuation’ or culmination. The ‘song’ is recognised by many historians as an addition to the Shunga-era *Mahabharata*’s composition, during what is termed the Kushana period (c. 0 CE- 300 CE) that traversed the north-western range of the subcontinent. It evokes a sensibility of bhakti as “a personal commitment to, and often a strong emotional attachment by the devotee to a divine figure. In the *Gita*, Krishna presents the path of bhakti in terms of an underlying theory of selfless action in which an attitude of wholehearted devotion to a personal divine figure can lead the devotee to a state of equanimity in action. Krishna adds the very important feature that the personal god can be simultaneously the transcendent, absolute, highest god. The path of bhakti can lead the devotee not only to worldly gain but also to the highest state of attainment – liberation from rebirth. In the *Harivamsa*, we can see the narrative version of this understanding of bhakti in the personal relationships of the *gopis* with Krishna, iterated by the *Bhagavata Purana* and love-poetry in the northern regions”⁵.

Engaging the relational structures that undergird the usage of the term ‘bhakti’, Davis sets forth the matter as follows: “‘Bhakti’ is a key term in Indic religious discourse and in scholarly studies of Indian religions. Most often, ‘bhakti’ is translated in its religious usage as ‘devotion’, but a look at a Sanskrit dictionary quickly indicates the word’s broad semantic range: distribution, sharing, participation, belonging to, attachment, homage, trust, love.... Like other key religious categories, the term ‘bhakti’ was too important not to be reused, adapted, contested, and redefined by multiple Indian religious cultures”⁶.

As such, desire for material well-being can elicit a pragmatic, transactional approach to religious veneration; affectionate, often amorous, attention to a supreme god enacts and promises delight in human existence while also securing liberation from it. Loving ‘interest’ in god as an aesthetic Object often encodes the desire *not* to desire. Keeping Davis’s precise and succinct introduction above in mind, this essay seeks to explore the ‘usage’ of bhakti by figuring an inextricable relation between sensorially-bound (aesthetic) experience – the profound scope of desire, attachment, attention, delight – and creative *action*.

To contain |reflect |pass through

Traversing the integrative space of devotional ardour, Prof. Indira Peterson explored the cultural production of the three most prolific poet-saints among the sixty-three saints (not all of whom were

poets) who are considered to be the leaders (*nayanars*) of the Tamil Shaiva devotional cult. Their work forms part of a collection of 796 such Tamil hymns by this cognoscenti called the '*Tevaram*', which comprises the first seven of the twelve-volume canon (*Tirumurai*) for this sect that was finalised by the eleventh or twelfth century CE.

Composed during the seventh and eighth centuries CE, each poem of these three *nayanars* – Appar, Sambandar, and Sundarar – is structured as a decad with a refrain; each verse and the entire hymn of eleven stanzas has, historically, been most often referred to as *patikam* (from the Sanskrit *padya*, 'verse'). Significantly, they celebrate in local habitations of their Tamil-speaking region – shrines or elaborately architectural temples – the embodied presence of a universal 'first being' whose heroic deeds have cosmic consequence for the existential realms of humans, demons, and deities, and are memorialised in cross-regional literary and visual narratives. Indeed, Shiva is the constituent of the material world: the languages of Sanskrit and Tamil; the Tamil land. The *Tevaram* itself has acquired the signature of the 'Tamil Veda' for communities in the shifting political contours of the Tamil world that have sought to identify their basis in the earliest extant emotional expressions of devotion for a creator-god in a vernacular language and idiom.

The King of the immortal gods, /the Lord whom devotees praise/in every age of the universe, /the pure one who destroys sin/for those who worship him with love, /dwells in the shrine of Annamalai, /on whose slopes /the herdsman looks for a lost buffalo/whose bellow he hears, /and when he plays his flute, /the whole herd gathers around⁷.

- Sambandar (*Tevaram* Book I, Decad 69, Verse 6)

This anthology thrives in cultural memory as song, often with musical accompaniment. As Davis writes, "the songs are location-specific. Each song relates to a particular shrine, as if the poet composed it right then and there at that place. All in all, these three *nayanars* visited and sang of some 269 holy places in southern India, sketching out a sacred landscape of the Tamil country. More than this, these poems provide guides, in the form of song, for others who would visit the homes of gods⁸." At one level, collectively they create a network of sacred sites "located primarily in the present-day linguistic region of Tamil Nadu and, at the time of composition, the Tamil-speaking region of South India as divided among the Pallavas, Cholas, and Pandyas"; they help ground Tamil Shaiva sectarian identity in and as a unified geography⁹. In its time, such 'poetic pilgrimage' helped fortify the ethos of Shaiva worship in a political landscape where Buddhist and Jain monastic communities also competed for royal patronage.

As it were, selections from this anthology of poems are performed by professional musicians and the laity in the context of Brahminical structures – philosophical and liturgical – for temple worship, which began to be facilitated on a magnificent scale by the Chola monarch Rajaraja I in the early eleventh century CE. This ruler was a stalwart imperial religious patron among various southern dynasties that instituted devotional modes of worship in a 'golden age' of temple culture lasting from 700 CE to longer than 1200 CE.

According to Dr. Peterson, this poetry draws upon the extant regional religious value of venerating the sacred as a concentrated, enlivening presence in specific places and objects. Many of the shrines envisioned in the *nayanars*' words owe their emotional charge to Shiva having performed feats of valour – that partake of Sanskritic *puranic* flavour – in that location, or to his having demonstrated his ineffable mercy and love for a single devotee who visited him there. Often, such a fellow 'servant' (*atiyar*) of the poet-saints is invoked by them to exemplify codes of devotion – entailing service to fellow devotees or acts of physical violence as self-sacrifice to god. The poems themselves embody exemplary devotion. The indefatigable synchronicity between physical labour through pilgrimage and love of god as contained in artistic output that is mobilised by, and evokes his localised *darshanas*, contributed new valences to the praxis of worship as a form of salvation in this life, this world, that led, eventually, to existence in Shiva's realm and freedom from the cycle of human rebirth.

Moreover, the poetry images Shiva as a 'Tamil' god by activating the physical features of the Tamil landscape in which he abides as a cultural signifier of the devotees' relations of love with him. This practice has literary antecedents in the Tamil Sangam poetry of the early centuries CE. Literary commentary in Tamil has posited an enduring approach to such 'classical' poetry in two loose categories: *akam* or the signification of subtle emotional states or moods constitutive of the tempestuous experience of personal love, often for archetypal war-heroes or eminent public figures; and *puram* which concerns the valorisation of historical kings, chieftains, and other heroic, munificent upholders of social order, often through expression of adoration for them. Poems of love in the *akam* mode identify five 'phases' (*uri*) of amorous relationships with five kinds of topography – and their attendant flora, fauna, and climatic conditions – that are characteristic of the Tamil region: the *kurinci* or hill landscape relates to the lovers' union, the *mullai* (forest) to patient waiting and domesticity, the seashore to anxiety and separation, the desert wasteland to unrequited love, and fecund pastures to betrayal. As seen in the verse above, Shiva is the beloved prototype for all human kings or masters, residing in a hill-shrine in whose geo-atmosphere inheres the promise of union with him. His resonant acts of violent valour, generosity, and intense affection inscribe him as a 'local' *puram* hero.

Pointing to the mutuality of art and life in the ecology of the *Tevaram* songs, Peterson clarifies that the *nayanar* poets are not concerned with intricate correspondences among elements in the five types of landscapes and the trajectories of amorous relation; she notes that "the riverine and agricultural landscape of the banks of the Kaveri and the wooded regions which connected the cultivated tracts, all recognisable to this day, are the dominant scene of the travels of the saints", and that they embody, as sites of physical pilgrimage, the emotional tonalities of hill (union) and seashore (separation) regions in the *akam* configuration¹⁰. "Among the situations of love", she writes, "the joy of union with Shiva supersedes all others in the *Tevaram*"¹⁰.

In all, by working with and through the physical endowments of a specific region, and the porosity of cultural habitats in terms of language, linguistic convention, sectarian and theological affiliation, and the experiential realities of god and humans, the *nayanar* pilgrim-poets harness material diversities to perform zones of aesthetic interaction. This work itself is a pliable instrument for establishing and contesting political and historical legacies premised on such particular, composite formations of bhakti as a unique, quintessential vernacular identity.

These forms of expression become instruments for other devotees across time to engage their own affective affinities towards their master, thereby manifesting liberation for themselves in this world and, eventually, securing liberation from it. Visions of a deity at a particular place fuse with poetic language to propagate a 'contagion of the heart'. Each poem is itself a veritable site of sensory pilgrimage, partaking of the devotional efficacy granted by a prior, emotionally motivated physical journey. Here, art and life are mirror-worlds that contain and open onto one another.

To metabolise |delimit |uplift

Articulating the formation of the warrior-hero Murugan as a subcontinental divine entity, Prof. Richard H. Davis first presented an iconographical understanding of this composite deity as familiar to contemporary modes of Tamil temple and domestic worship, before exploring him as a poetic mood in an anthology of Sangam poetry on love and war.

Davis says, "Murugan's 'Tamilness' goes back to the earliest poetry of the Sangam age in the early centuries CE.... Often called the 'red one', he is a resident deity of the hill regions and is associated with the poetic conventions ascribed to the *kurinci* landscape: [the space of] lovers' union. In Sangam poetry, he is a localised god without the transcendental value that modern bhakti traditions see in him"⁵. Referring to his visual depiction astride or alongside a peacock, Davis states that, in this context, "the frenzied dance of the peacock alludes to the devotional dance that his tribal devotees perform"

when possessed by his divine energy⁵. These dramatic performances meld indigenous shamanic experiences in the devotional process of interacting with this deity. Furthermore, Murugan holds a spear (*vella*) crowned with the shape of the *venkai* leaf that grows in the Tamil hill regions; the weapon is often decorated with peacock feathers. As protector and ally of the hill-residents, he is legendary for defeating the demon Surapadma, “a demonic force that causes terror in the mountain regions.

... But he also has a Sanskritic side in North India as Skanda, who is part of the Shaiva pantheon: the ambiguous younger son of Shiva and Parvati and the special born commander of the army of the gods” or Vedic *devatas*. In one North Indian narrative, “he is the son of Agni, who has adventurous intercourse with the six Krittikas, wives of the sages or *brahmarishis*; in others he is the offspring of Shiva’s seed without the direct participation of Parvati and is nursed by the six Krittikas”, for whom he grows six heads to satisfy their maternal inclinations⁵. “His [Shaiva] identity is recorded in a series of episodes within the *Mahabharata* and by the Gupta period [c. fourth to sixth centuries CE], the traditions of these two deities – Murugan and Skanda were synthesised, at least in South India, into a single divine figure. This is represented, [visually], by his two wives: Mahavalli, his younger ‘southern’ wife”, the daughter of a tribal chieftain who, in some narratives, ‘ascended’ to goddess-hood through her alliance with this debonair lover-god; and Devasena or Devayani, his elder, Vedic partner⁵. They are often differentiated in dress and complexion; the dark-skinned Valli wears a coral-pink sari in a ‘photo-print’ from the 1960s, while Devayani’s lightness is offset by her deep-green garment. Imaged with six heads and twelve arms, his peacock “in full pride, subdues the head of a cobra. He is also portrayed as a *bala*, often known [in this *rupa*] as Shri Kamala Murugan, having a lotus-seat”⁵. As a child or an adult, he sometimes holds a banner emblazoned with a rooster motif.

Like Shiva, the devotional experience of this cosmopolitan deity is localised culturally by the articulation of a pilgrimage circuit of six locations that are significant to his biography. For instance, at Tirutani he married Valli, and at Tiruchendur he defeated Surapadma. However, the six shrines recorded as sacred to him in the annals of Sangam poetry differ from those that are venerated in contemporary practices of worship.

As such, the earliest extant devotional dedication to this god, *Tirumurukarrupaddai*, is composed by an individual named Nakirrar, and it is in the form of a guide poem (*atrapaddai*). As a genre emblematic of classical *puram* poetry, such work is structured as an encounter between two poets in which one urges the other to seek the benefaction of a generous local chieftain or king. The poet-guide enumerates the victories and virtues of this imperial patron and evokes the prosperity of his province. Nakirrar, the speaker of *this* panegyric, praises Murugan “as a patron-king would be in other poems of this genre, but the gift [that the god] offers his supplicants is personal salvation instead of food and wealth kings usually gave to bards who sought their patronage. In the eleventh century, *Tirumurukarrupattai* was incorporated into the eleventh *Tirumurai* (‘sacred arrangement’) of the Tamil Shaivite canon”¹¹.

As seen with the *nayanars*, “the idiom of praise for heroic valour is adopted to express loving devotion for [a divinity]”, who is manifest in multiple locations simultaneously: in this case, the six shrines that do not correspond perfectly with present-day pilgrimage routes in Tamil Nadu⁵. Davis notes that “the poet describes the six faces of the god and his twelve arms, showing that his identity as Skanda has already been folded into his Tamil appearance by the sixth century CE, and that correlates in some way to the six sacred sites of the god. It may be that this poem is seeking to make an argument for this synthesis of the Sanskritic and Tamil traditions”⁵. Within this poetic paradigm, Murugan is a supreme being, and other deities such as Rama, Vishnu, and Shiva pay obeisance to him.

Significantly, the poem is set in the *kurinci* moodscape, and “also describes the worship offered to Murugan in a local temple by the daughter of a hill-tribe, presumably Valli, who makes her offerings to Murugan, ‘till He arrives and comes into her’”⁵:

and in the awesome vast temple

where the daughter of the hill tribe
worships

raising a banner with His splendid bird on it,
patting white mustard seed into ghee,
chanting wordlessly her special chants,
bowing
and scattering flowers,
wearing two cloths
different in colour and kind,
threads of crimson on her wrists,
scattering parched grain
and offering soft white rice
mixed with the blood
of strong fattened large-footed rams
in small offerings in several dishes,
sprinkling sandal fragrances
with yellow turmeric,
cutting together red oleander
and big cool garlands
and letting them hang,
blessing the towns
on the rich hill-slopes,
offering the sweet smoke of incense,
singing kurinci songs
while the roar of waterfalls
mixes with the music of instruments,
spreading red flowers,
spreading fearful blood-smeared millet.

where the daughter of the hill tribe
sounds Murugan's favourite instruments
and offers worship to Murugan
till He arrives
and comes into her
to terrify enemies and deniers.¹²

Variations on devotional practices in relation to 'earthly deities', and a 'pre-bhakti' regional syntax of theatricality 'defer', here, in this collegial, erudite cultural sphere, to a supreme god who appears 'wherever devotees praise/ and move His heart' with their expressive passion.

Acknowledging the seminal work of translator and literary theorist A. K. Ramanujan, Davis attends here to the structure of *mutual participation* between divine and human existential realities as a distinctive feature of bhakti, one elaborated on by the scholar of religion Karen Pechilis. For Ramanujan, "the poet evokes the primal and essential feature of bhakti: not ecstasy, not enstasy, but an *embodiment*"; that is, as Davis clarifies, "neither a shamanic flight to the heavens or soul-loss, nor a yogic autonomy or withdrawal of the senses, but a partaking of the god"⁵.

Crucially, however, Davis observes that, given the structure of the genre in which the poem participates, the speaker describes the female devotee's experience of possession as one who stands outside of its implication. Strikingly, for the later Tamil Vaishnava *alvar* poet Nammalvar (c. ninth century CE), Vishnu's "overarching, transcendent nature" is capable of becoming present in multiple locations, including the poet's body, 'the paradisaal dwelling-place of Vishnu', which is Venkatam hill

itself, 'cool and holy...'¹⁵. Devotion becomes a devouring act.

To stratify |cross-dress |split

The celebration of material creation as a theological entity is the subject of Navaratri festivities that vary in the manner of family resemblances across the present-day Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil-speaking regions of the country, even as they embody traditions associated with the 'Sanskritised' Great Goddess. Prof. Vasudha Narayanan sought to create connections between the imperial and domestic contexts of this ritual-performance in these regions, both aspects bearing witness, as it were, to the inextricable functions of creation, social order, and cultural 'recreation'.

The nine sacred nights of the goddess are recognised as a quarterly recurrence in the lunar astrological calendar; however, Prof. Narayanan argues that Sharad Navaratri, the cycle culminating in the observance of Dussehra or Vijayadashami (the tenth day of victory in the phase of the waxing moon or *shukla-paksha*) between September and October (*ashvin-masa*) each year – commemorated in many parts of the north for marking the defeat of the demon-king of Lanka – is particularly significant. The myriad devotional activities that affirm life and generativity in this period follow in sharp relief against the "most inauspicious fortnight connected with ancestors (*pitr-paksha*) in the [Brahminical] calendar"¹³.

In the Tamil region, the visual display set up in homes, predominantly by the women of households, and as seen today, across the fault lines of caste and class, is referred to as *kolu*. This consists, typically, of various dolls and figurines arranged on a tiered platform with an odd number of steps – seven, nine, or eleven – covered with light-coloured cloth. As if to enact the diversity of the material world, the assemblage can include – Narayanan notes of *kolus* at home in the diaspora and the subcontinent since the mid-twentieth century through the present moment – Barbie dolls, Punch and Judy puppets, zoo animals and railway sets alongside, above, or below figures representing Durga-Mahisasuramardini or the incarnations of Vishnu.

Narayanan writes, "The Tamil lexicon gives the following meanings for the word '*kolu*': '1. Royal presence, *darbar*, sitting-in-state, presence of the deity in the temple; 2. Decorations in a Hindu house at the time of the Navaratri festival.' ...The *kolu*, therefore, is etymologically linked to the act and spectacle of a king sitting in state, as in a royal *darbar*. More descriptively, the festival is known in Telugu as *Bommala Koluru*, or 'dolls holding a *darbar*', a sentiment captured in the Kannada name *Bombe Habba* or *Gombe Habba* (festival of dolls)"¹⁴.

As such, a distinguishing feature of displays associated with the Kannada region is the placement of dolls representing a royal couple (*pattada gomme*) on the lowest tier of the platform. In an ethnographic study of the Navaratri festival in Mysore, the scholar Alka Ikegame "has shown [a] connection between the royal exercises of kingship and the *raja-rani* dolls of the household *gombe habba* in Mysore, Karnataka"¹⁵. Ikegame's fieldwork has revealed that in the late-nineteenth century CE, women in the domestic sphere would venerate the king and queen dolls with offerings and sacred applications "at precisely the same moment as the *maharaja* ascended to the throne during the *darbar* in the palace.... They knew exactly when they had to do so because a salute of twenty-one guns, which the people in the city could hear, was fired at the moment when the *maharaja* climbed onto the throne.... The domestic worship of the *raja* and *rani* dolls, and the royal ritual in the palace, were thus linked by this Anglo-Indian ritual device"¹⁶.

Intriguingly, placement of these royal figurines on the lowest tier does not signify their humble stature in a display that is often structured as a Darwinian hypothesis, with 'lower-order' biological forms arranged on the lower tiers and leading up to the divine realms culminating in the creative principle embodied by Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi. Rather, it ensures accessibility for worship, folding the imperial and intimate dimensions of this festival into a single devotional practice. Narayanan notes

that in Tamil, wooden figures similar to the coronation couple are known as *marapacci* dolls, though they are not understood as regal presences, “a meaning that is so prominent in Karnataka”¹⁵.

Many families across the regions of southern India observe the ninth night of this processual festival as *Mahanavami*, when they lay down and pay obeisance to artistic implements as tools of trade, and venerate their teachers as gurus in dedication to the goddess Sarasvati. On the tenth day, in honour of the divine feminine as Vijayalakshmi, students often take first steps in a new artistic endeavour, such as painting, music, or dance, to herald the triumphant regeneration or re-creation of the cultural order that sustains society.

Indeed, Narayanan is persuaded by the multi-disciplinary evidence she has encountered discerningly, that the Tamil *kolu* is a ‘domestication’ of a once royal, public state of affairs in Karnataka, as gleaned from travelogues contemporaneous with the period of the Vijayanagara kings (fourteenth to fifteenth centuries CE), “secondary literature (primarily on kingship and the Vijayanagara kingdom)” and oral testimony like that documented above¹⁷. In both spaces, the visual manifestation of social and divine order integrates with the principle of cultural fertility as performed through music and dance in a matrix of convivial communality. Since the late twentieth century CE, “*kolu* has become part of state identity and revived as a heritage festival in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra. People from many walks of life and many castes...have started to practice this ritual as emblematic of a shared historical culture”¹⁸.

It seems, then, that this historical trajectory of a multivalent celebration participates in the principles of integration, diversity, and cyclicity.

As such, the principal theological narrative that undergirds these cross-regional festivities is the Devi Mahatmya’s valorisation of Durga as the slayer of the buffalo-demon who threatens the sanctity of spiritual and moral virtue in all created realms of the universe. As a warrior-goddess who is venerated as the absolute eternal, omniscient principle, she intervenes in the affairs of men to uphold the regency and splendour of human kings on Earth. To this end, the Devi as Chandika mirrors the qualified (Rama) and studied (Krishna) composure of Vishnu’s epic avatars; whereas the person of Chamunda whom she ‘opens onto’ (generates) surpasses and hyperbolises the ferocious tendencies – like a *delirium tremens* – of all the deities in the Brahminical pantheon. Thus, she bears a ‘family resemblance’ to the heroic Vishnu; in the Tamil region, she is recognised as his sister (the Sanskrit epithet Narayani is pertinent here). The *Pancharatra* theological and tantric-liturgical tradition that advocates the supremacy of Vishnu-Narayana, in a treatise of the twelfth century CE or later, sees Durga as an embodiment of Vaishnavi *shakti*¹⁹. As the supreme being herself in a *puranic* context, all manifestations of the divine feminine, in their seemingly contradictory roles of maternal nourishment and terrifying aggression, emanate from her.

Thus, in the Great Devi, the royal and domestic aspects of the *kolu* are “never in opposition to one another and nor are they self-sufficient, but rather are strongly interrelated and interdependent”²⁰. The goddess is the king sitting in state during domestic and public celebrations, and the artistic proficiency that enlivens both contexts *performs* her nature.

These performances are one way of embodying her auspicious fertility. Narayanan notes that “the display of new life and new creation is made obvious in many ways in pan-[regional] ethnic and sectarian traditions. This emphasis on life-affirming symbols, objects, and rituals is seen in a number of ways including (but not limited to) the following: the abundant use of ritually grown grain, lentils, beans, and seeds; the use of material objects invested with spiritual meaning, like a metal *kalasha* (jar) filled with the waters of life, or an earthenware pot with holes within which the fire of creation burns through the nine nights; a ritual veneration of young, prepubescent girls who are considered to be manifestations of the Devi and filled with the potential to give birth to children...”²¹.

All of this evinces affinities with the devotional cults centred around nature and fertility goddesses like those propitiated for worldly abundance as small-scale terracotta figurines in domestic contexts during what is termed the Shunga period. As such, from within the structure of cultural history, the Great Goddess becomes an identity integrating and expanding on, *inter alia*, “an older mythical substratum that was absorbed into all the ancient religions of India”, as the art historian Naman Ahuja posits²². Though unnamed, these personages performed historically specific roles that need not be perceived as reaching their apotheosis in a ‘great’ tradition that was, then, simply latent.

In all, Narayanan observes that “the intersection of *pitr-paksha* and the waking of Durga becomes a liminal time of great potential, growth, prosperity, and creativity. The creative aspect is particularly explicit in the emphasis on sprouting grains and beans, which form the main food that is given out as *prasada* during the festival...”²³. The elaborate, satiating culinary preparations that consume the celebration of Dipavali, then, seem to mark a maturation of creative activity.

To make strange |separate |con-fuse

The literary inheritances of Sangam poetry, for the Vaishnava ‘counterparts’ to the *nayanar* poets, help meld panegyric – generous enumeration of the heroic acts performed by Vishnu-Narayana’s avatars on Earth that register as a genealogy for his imagistic manifestations and his incarnation through poetry – with the artistic idiom of intense love for an illustrious regent. The Tamil Shaiva poets, as stated above, most often delighted in figuring the joy of union with Shiva that the visions of him in, and as, his favoured locations in the Tamil landscape proffered to them. This becomes an exhortation to others to experience the god similarly. The works of the later poets dedicated to Vishnu explore, through myriad psycho-social postures – the intimate, the ecstatic, the introspective, the didactic or polemical, the sensual and erotic – how the thorny blossoming and realisation of desire for union with their beloved makes a ‘want-wit’ of them. As it were, Prof. Archana Venkatesan gave voice to the range of psychic experiences that attest to the unnerving volatility of resolute devotional passion that transforms conceptions of selfhood.

For the twelve *alvar* poet-saints (c. seventh to ninth centuries CE) of Tamil-speaking South India whose lives and works were canonised around the tenth century CE and are central to the later, elaborate Shri Vaisnava theological tradition, the lineage of Sangam literature becomes significant in moulding protean affective realities of the self. The poetic self becomes a site of negotiation with the all-consuming nature of Vishnu; one etymological derivation of the word ‘*alvar*’ registers as ‘those who are immersed’ (in god). This relation between one’s self and the self of god is always already interpolated by a community of like-inspired devotees (*sahridayas*), and it embraces the salvific experiences of future servants of Vishnu-Narayana, the supreme being, as well. The politics of such address contours the identities of their work in relation to pan-regional liturgical praxis and historical attempts to establish theological canons through a hagiographical reading of their text as life, and vice versa.

I melt. I fray. But he doesn’t care
if I live or die.
If that stealthy thief, that duplicitous Govardhana
should even glance at me
I shall pluck these useless breasts of mine
from their roots
I will fling them at his chest
stop the fire scorching me.²⁴

- Kotai-Andal, *Nacciya Tirumoli* (13.8)

A characteristic feature that distinguishes works in the *akam* and *puram* modes *within* a shared aesthetic sphere is the effect achieved by a certain juxtaposition of theme and voice. ‘Interior’ emotional states,

and the trajectories of amorous relations are presented as archetypal experiences communicated through a bouquet of voices that bear witness to a trysting relationship: the heroine's friend or foster-mother, for instance. The frame created by this *dramatis personae* as a poetic convention delimits the poet's identification with the often tumultuous journeyings of the characters who inscribe this 'love-story', often in the first-person voice. As such, the audience is discouraged from reading the work as speaking of a poet's specific, biographical experiences. In contrast, the speaker who addresses his chieftain or king in eulogy may be voicing the poet's particular relationship with a historical imperial patron within an affirmed political hierarchy and the poetic formations of intimacy it engenders.

As it were, when the *alvar* poets merge these tributaries of expression, they invite the reader to participate in their direct address to Vishnu through a plethora of rhetorical stances: sometimes cajoling or chiding or querying him, at other moments rejecting his hold on their lives or expressing bewilderment at his nature. Moreover, the voices that these poet-devotees deploy to articulate a relationship of shifting distances with the self and the beloved – the *nayika* (heroine), the *sakhi* (sympathetic helpmate), the *gopis* of Vrindavan, the mother whose girl has 'eloped' with god – are rooted, even as tropes of classical love-poetry, in their affective relationship to a personal god. The experience of separation and longing creates the self as a feminine ontology.

Thus, Venkatesan drew attention to the tendencies, in both commentaries within a shared experiential tradition and academic scholarship, of reading this devotional poetry as a biographical record of exemplary spiritual encounter. She avers that this may be the case for some poets, but not always. As such, the physical-emotional 'events' registered in these works become the contested basis of later ecumenical, interpretive theologies and hagiographies that compete for the position of ontological truth with others within and outside of their existential traditions. The shared ecosystem of the poet's art and life and their composite afterlife is recognisable, here, as refractive, transformative integration.

Within the textured space of the poem itself, the poet's mode of addressing other devotees and himself – in a specific conventional stanza that follows both the earlier single poems of a hundred verses and later compositions of discrete thematic units in ten or eleven verses each (*Tirumoli*, 'Sacred Utterance') – variously collapses and creates distances in selfhood among these intimate, theatrical agents. This verse is called a *phalashruti*, "which literally means 'the benefits of hearing a result', or 'the statement of a result'"²⁵. It has antecedents in Sanskrit liturgical texts and incantatory compositions (*stotras*) that enumerate the worldly and other-worldly 'fruits' of personal recitation or of performing specific ritual or sacrificial oblations through the mediation of stringent Brahminical erudition.

In the context of *alvar* poetry, this concluding device is inscribed in the third-person voice, and provides historical information about the writer – his name, sometimes his place of origin, or even the count of his poetic output: 'Shatakopan [canonised as Nammalvar] composed this garland of ten verses in a set of perfect thousands'.

Cool clouds move gently, ponds thick with flowers
invite honeybees, this is the land of Tirumankai,
Kalikanri, who wields a shining sword
His lovely words are a divine garland. Hold them firmly
at death call the name
in trouble think the name
even in times of ease say the name
Narayana's name.²⁵

Significantly, Venkatesan notes, "it is the poet's commentary on his own work, a first-level analysis of the efficacy, beauty, and spiritual authority that the poet is vesting in the poem, or the excerpt that the poet is talking about"²⁵. The poet sets himself up as a conduit for the devotional experiences of future devotees, promising them the fruits of his ardour and labour, and eventually, salvation from

the cycle of human rebirth, and liberation to Vishnu's heaven in Vaikuntha. Sometimes, the poem is materialised as a ritual offering – a garland of song – whose potency supersedes the daily offering of flower garlands in the context of domestic and temple *pujas*. It seems a space in which the tortuously detailed emotional tempest of the poet's devotional journey in the preceding stanzas *becomes* the beatific liberation of later devotees whose lives extend the spatial reality of the poem and the temporal existence of the poet; the past of the poet and the future of his/her fellow converge here.

In so doing, this statement of the poet's generous benefaction and artistic excellence seems to alienate the character it refers to in the third-person voice from the first-person narrator of the earlier verses, who is caught in the throes of visceral longing, lamentation, despair, rage, and self-deprecation. One way of understanding this striking juxtaposition is to see a discrete poem followed by a *phalashruti* as a strategic enactment of a teleological emotional odyssey that dissolves the frame of archetype through direct interlocution, of varying vocal range and specificity, with an embodied divinity. The poetic self is not split but transformed, as it 'unfurls' before the listener or reader.

Furthermore, the conflation of past and future 'contents' of reality described above needs amending. The *phalashrutis* differ markedly from those in liturgical contexts, in the ontology of the aesthetic experience they speak for. The emphasis in such poetry is on the staging of experiential encounter with god that is premised on a potent balancing act between the 'events' of ontological separateness and sensorial intimacy, between the relations of egalitarianism and supremacy through which god permeates the created world and his devotees, and which are acknowledged in devotional address. The *phalashrutis* in ritual treatises promise to their audience the *structure of signification* encoded in the text: a desired efficacy predicated on perfect correspondence between the recited word and the reality it contains and invokes. The overarching signification of a devotional *alvar* poem that joins Subject and Object becomes the experience of what Karen Pechilis terms '*unscripted encounter*' with a beloved deity; the recitation of it by future *sahridayas* questing for spiritual union would then seem to release and infuse this signification into their lives, promising them the benefaction of direct, volatile divine encounter²⁶. The poem, thus 'supervised' by the *phalashruti* verse, becomes both object and process.

And so, the poetry of the cultural realm that integrates art and life as dramatic performance, inheres in the *uneven passages of affect* among varied configurations of these two 'entities'. For individual seekers and institutional purveyors of devotional experience, 'relatedness' and 'interruptions in relatedness' become the ethos of a bhakti imagination that seeks reality in imaginative space, and that contests the reality of the imagination²⁷.

Conclusion: Towards an Aesthetics of Bhakti

The demonstration above both affirms and belies conceptions of bhakti in the popular imagination that the scholar of religion John Stratton Hawley, concerned with mechanisms of ideology, encapsulates in the introduction to the co-edited opus *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*. In a rhetoric of shorthand, he voices the understandings of bhakti as a "religion of participation, community, enthusiasm, song, and often of personal challenge.... It evokes the idea of widely shared religiosity for which institutional superstructures weren't all that relevant, and which, once activated, could be historically contagious – a glorious disease of the collective heart. It implies direct divine encounter, experienced in the lives of individual people. These people, moved by that encounter, turn to poetry, which is the natural vehicle of bhakti, and poetry expresses itself just as naturally in song"²⁸.

Approaching the subject of bhakti as a cultural historian, one of his co-editors, Christian Lee Novetzke, stresses "the idea of a public", which, in the context of bhakti, can be understood as the institutional space of temples, the physical and cultural-political site of religious performances, and "communities of pilgrimage" – all "social forms" that sustain devotion "within the sphere of an individual's consciousness"²⁹.

As such, the collective opus of these writers, edited with their academic colleague Swapna Sharma, attempts to, subtly and variously, “identify the site where bhakti meets power”; and the socially inclusive ‘power’ of poetic transitivity is one aspect of this topography³⁰. The facets of their compilation demonstrate how bhakti, as a relational structure, activates social power dynamics both as a repressive and a generative force in society; they evince how convolutions of hegemony and protest instantiate certain systems of bhakti in ethical confrontation with others. This is a subject of persisting and persistent dialogue, one that is beyond the scope of this paper.

As seen above, though, devotional experience accrues and potentialises, simultaneously, the existential constituents of communality and alienation; this unevenly forms and is acted on by the ideological affinities of existing ‘orders’. Such a dialectic crystallises the peculiar configurations of radicality and conservatism in any devotional community – collectives of saints, cultures defined by a dialogue between the home and the temple, nationalist mobilisations – in and across historical space-time.

In all, the propositions of both theorists above emphasise engaging devotional practices as sustained cultural phenomena – ‘traditions’ – existing in and through the socio-cultural nodes and networks that inextricably transmit and transform them. Recognising the intrinsic relation between pan-cultural persistence and transformation of devotional activity, one may posit bhakti as a multiplicity of practices that concretise a *relationship* among text (narrative, poetry, philosophy, liturgy), the affective performance of poetic works, private and public forms of worship and festive rites, stringent Brahminical ritual, and the context of the temple with its attendant social dynamics as an institutional framework for these activities as well as an architectural space that emblematises devotion as visual praxis.

These interactions variously shape, respond to, and are reflexive of artistic and theological textures that (trans)fertilise as cultural paradigms in a region, as well as practices of institutional patronage and the ethos of community-formation (among saints, priests, existing and potential devotees, and others) in that historical place. As formations that create, share and transform socio-religious values by interaction with extant socio-political structures, they sometimes define one another’s limits and specific identities, contain each other, integrate with and expand on their interlocutors, ironise or establish themselves as teleological culminations of their peers³¹.

Thus, bhakti may be conceived as an *aesthetic matrix* that can be witnessed through the complex integration of cultural *genres* and *gender* dynamics, the latter understood through the social markers of devotees and their ‘communes’ vis-a-vis ideo-juridical realities, and in terms of structures of devotional performance that inscribe relations to and attributes of divine agency. What inheres in these is a protean manifestation of *power* because addressing the presence of god in the material world raises and resolves contradictions in the relation between her/his and our existential realities, and in the performance of social morality³². Indeed, devotional poetics is nourished by a relation between unequal realms that relate with one another through a potent configuration of egalitarianism and supremacy, in concerted engagement with the material world. The three scholars above state crisply, “anyone who has ever fallen in love knows that love is a form of power”³³.

As a versatile, energetic idea, bhakti is material formation. - S.H.

¹ Davis, Richard H., “Popular Religious Cultures During the Shunga Era” in *Religions of Early India: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 227

² Ibid., p. 229

³ Ibid., p. 222

⁴ Ibid., p. 228

⁵ Passage from Prof. Richard H. Davis' lecture on "Murugan: Deity of Early Tamilnadu", August 12, 2026, conducted on the Zoom platform for Jnanapravaha Mumbai as part of the series *Puja, Poetry, Performance: Enduring Bhakti Traditions of the Indian Subcontinent*, August 5, 12, 19, 26, 2026.

⁶ Davis, Richard H., "Popular Religious Cultures During the Shunga Era" in *Religions of Early India: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 230

⁷ Passage from Prof. Indira Peterson's lecture on "The *Tevaram* Hymns: Tamil Shaiva Bhakti in Text and Performance", August 5, 2026, conducted on the Zoom platform for Jnanapravaha Mumbai as part of the series *Puja, Poetry, Performance: Enduring Bhakti Traditions of the Indian Subcontinent*, August 5, 12, 19, 26, 2026.

⁸ Davis, Richard H., "Homes for Gods (460 CE- 700CE)" in *Religions of Early India: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 510

⁹ Peterson, Indira V., "Singing of a Place: Pilgrimage and Metaphor in the *Tevaram* Songs of the Tamil Shaivite Saints" in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 102, No.1 (Jan- Mar 1982), p. 72

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78

¹¹ Ramanujan, A. K., and Cutler, Norman, "From Classicism to Bhakti" in Vijay Dharwadkar ed. *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 234- 235

¹² "Book Four: Religious Poems" in *Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil*, selected and translated by A. K. Ramanujan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 215- 216

¹³ Narayanan Vasudha, "Royal *Darbar* and Domestic *Kolus*: Social Order, Creation, Procreation, and Re-Creation" in Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodriguez ed. *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navaratri Festival in South Asia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018), p. 277

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 276

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 283- 284

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 278

¹⁹ See Dennis Hudson's essay "Pinnai: Krishna's Cowherd Wife" in John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff ed. *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1995), pp. 238- 262

²⁰ Narayanan Vasudha, "Royal *Darbar* and Domestic *Kolus*: Social Order, Creation, Procreation, and Re-Creation" in Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodriguez ed. *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navaratri Festival in South Asia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018), p. 280

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 289- 290

²² Davis, Richard H., "Popular Religious Cultures During the Shunga Era" in *Religions of Early India: A Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 261

²³ Narayanan Vasudha, "Royal *Darbar* and Domestic *Kolus*: Social Order, Creation, Procreation, and Re-Creation" in Caleb Simmons, Moumita Sen, and Hillary Rodriguez ed. *Nine Nights of the Goddess: The Navaratri Festival in South Asia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018), p. 295

²⁴ "Introduction" in Andal, *The Secret Garland*, translated from the Tamil by Archana Venkatesan (New Delhi: Harper Perennial: An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), p. 21

²⁵ Passage from Prof. Archana Venkatesan's lecture on "Immersed in Vishnu: An Introduction to the *Alvars*", August 26, 2026, conducted on the Zoom platform for Jnanapravaha Mumbai as part of the series *Puja, Poetry, Performance: Enduring Bhakti Traditions of the Indian Subcontinent*, August 5, 12, 19, 26, 2026.

²⁶ See Karen Pechilis's essay "Affect and Identity in Early Bhakti: Karraikal Ammaiyar as Poet, Servant, and Pey" in John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma, ed. *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2019), pp. 25- 36. Pechilis's essay argues, through demonstration, for the recognition of inevitable tension between a reading of devotional poetry that elicits modes of subjective self-fashioning and the 'necessary' dimensions of selfhood that must alleviate the communal anxieties accruing in the hagiographical project, concerned as it is with fashioning a canon of poetry and sainthood. Significantly, Pechilis shows how the nature of poetic encounter 'creates' aspects of divinity: the *nayanar* poet-saint

Karaikal's identification of herself as a 'ghoul' (*pey*) who haunts cremation grounds for sightings of Shiva's awesome liminal, 'funerary' dance that embodies new creation, transgresses experiences of the beautiful lord, 'sweet as sugarcane' that are central to the ardour of the pilgrim-poets discussed above. The god participates in the poet's morbid, yet dynamic, performed being. Pechilis concludes, "Karaikkal *pey*'s affective embodiment of devotional participation as accessible to humanity, as immersive, and as discomfiting later became embedded in a canonical Tamil Siva bhakti discourse that largely focused on a reassuringly paternalistic view of Siva. That her words were also preserved in that canon allows us to contemplate her counterpoint, that an exploratory self-scripting is historically at the core of the lasting bhakti imagination", p. 35. As such, *this* paper, through its fixation on the *phalashruti* verses of the *alvars*, is concerned with the opacities inherent in passages through and across 'bhakti imaginations'.

²⁷ See Pechilis's invocation of the "modalities of affect, according to Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg in their beautifully titled essay, 'An Inventory of Shimmers'", in her scholarship cited above, p. 26.

²⁸ "Introduction: The Power of Bhakti" in John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma, ed. *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2019), pp. 3-4

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7

³¹ This conception of the interrelation among devotional practices shares in the translator and literary theorist A. K. Ramanujan's poignant exploration of "related kinds of reflexivity" in the literary traditions that give ballast to the variously intertwined religious praxis of the subcontinent. He states, ever so simply, "I would like to suggest the obvious: that cultural traditions in India are indissolubly plural and often conflicting but are organised through at least two principles, (a) context-sensitivity and (b) reflexivity of various sorts, both of which constantly generate new forms out of the old ones... Reflexivity takes many forms: awareness of self and other, mirroring, distorted mirroring, parody, family resemblances and rebels, dialectic, antistructure, utopias and dystopias, the many ironies connected with these responses, and so on." See "Where Mirrors are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections" in Vijay Dharwadker ed. *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 8 of pp. 6- 34

³² This image of a trefoil knot that characterises bhakti's substantiality (*tattva*) refers to the title of an anthology on 'folkloristics' edited by Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom and Margaret A. Mills. See *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994).

³³ "Introduction: The Power of Bhakti" in John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke, and Swapna Sharma, ed. *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2019), p. 7.

Announcements

THE LURE OF THE DESERT: RE-ASSESSING PALMYRA

ALESSANDRA RICCI

October 21st, 22nd & 23rd, 2026 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Online Public Lecture on ZOOM

Registration Fee: Rs. 3,000/-, Students*: Rs. 1,500/- | Recording Available*



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

Since the 17th-century discovery of Palmyra (Tadmor is its Semitic name), the city appeared to occupy a remarkable position in the geo-cultural crossroads of civilisations where Hellenistic and Roman aesthetic traditions met, transformed, and were transformed by the cultures of the ancient Near East.

However, scholarly narratives on Palmyra have recurrently been influenced by orientalisering, classicising, and colonial and postcolonial trends. Palmyra has and continues to be cast also as intrinsically connected with Western traditions or alternatively as a child of the Orient. Its famous third century queen Zenobia is popularised as a rebellious warrior against Rome, acting with the complicity of the philosopher Cassius Longinus. These narratives have found ample support in selective readings of the iconographic and documentary materials from Palmyra, something the city abounds in.

This series centres on the art and architecture of Palmyra in its own time, within the context of the culture and politics of its time and with emphasis on the Roman periods. The course considers the cultural expressions of Palmyra as active voices of their times and it places value on the meanings of self-representations as narratives produced by the Palmyrene themselves.



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.

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

BETWEEN THE EYE AND THE SOUL: BEAUTY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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November 3rd – 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 Nazari 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 *Quranic* 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
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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. 1,500/- | 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.



Dr. Lisa Reilly
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Professor of Architectural
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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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