

The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

The Intersection of Hinduism and Contemporary Society

June 2-3 2022

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CONFERENCE PROGRAM

(All times in UTC)

DAY 1: THURSDAY 2nd JUNE 2022

Welcome 12pm

SESSION 1 12:10pm - 1:30pm

Angela Burt

The Changing Relationship of the Hare Krishna Movement with Mainstream Society: An Alignment Perspective

Gustavo H. P. Moura

World Kirtan: Music and Spirituality in a Transcultural Whirlpool

Ace Simpson and Alan Herbert

Rapture and Rupture: Experiences of Former Ashram Residents

SESSION 2 1:30pm - 2:50pm

Tuhina Ganguly

The Wonder of Darshan: Going Beyond the Local and the Visual

Hrvoje Čargonja

Dialectics of Narrative Identity in the Hare Krishna Stories of Religious Experience

Cecilia Bastos

Mind, Body and Subjectivity: The Performance of Yoga and Meditation Practitioners

DAY 2: FRIDAY 3rd JUNE 2022

Welcome

12pm

SESSION 1

12:10pm - 1:30pm

Richa Shukla

Contemporary Hindu Woman: Strangled Soul or an Emancipated One?

Sraddha Shivani Rajkomar

Hinduism and Creole Cultural Memory in Present-day Mauritius

Priyesh Patel

Finding the One: Marriage and Love among Hindus in the UK

SESSION 2

1:30pm - 3:10pm

Gowda Gomathi & Babu Lenin G

Memorial Stones as Social Identity in the Past

Paolo E. Rosati

Cultural Identity and Cultural Memory at Kāmākhyā: A Preliminary Study

Michael Sheludko

Russo-Ukrainian War and Problems of Violence Justification Among Russian and Ukrainian Vaishnavas

Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson

Acting in the Underground: Life as a Hare Krishna Devotee in the Republic of Lithuania (1979-1989)

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Mind, body and subjectivity: the performance of yoga and meditation practitioners

Cecilia Bastos

National Museum - Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

In this presentation, I analyse the dimensions of spirituality related to the body and the subjectivities of yoga and meditation practitioners, students of Vedanta that I have been researching since 2009. These are practitioners who maintain a learning connection with a teacher or guru and are dedicated to carrying out a "life of yoga", that is, seeking self-observation as a form of self-knowledge, and of knowing their habits and their own patterns of reaction. In other words, they try to observe how they react to events and to others in order to gain physical and mental balance and to become "free" from samsara (understood as a cycle in which people go through periods of ups and downs, happiness and sadness). These mental exercises are practised with the goal of reaching an ideal state of wisdom that is never really achieved or fully conquered: it is more about looking at their way of life and understanding how they "react" to it on a daily basis (observing where they tend to lose emotional control) than to become that ideal in practice.

Furthermore, in both yoga and meditation a process of body modification based on a form of Hindu asceticism is visible, carried out through effort and repetition. I understand that the transformation that their bodies undergo, through physical and mental techniques, implies the adoption of an "orientalised" lifestyle in their worldview and/or way of thinking. Practitioners tend to ritualise life as a whole, bringing new meanings to their multiple experiences and perceiving themselves as continually connected to the cosmos. Seeking to understand the contradictions in their perceptions of their own selves, I analyse the reflexive processes inherent in these practices to understand how practitioners construct their identity. I see their identity as based on an "internal" discipline, a renunciation that suggests asceticism; albeit an asceticism that seems to incorporate an "external" model of the yogic tradition, and one that is internalised through the realisation of disciplines which affects certain emotions and behaviours.

The changing relationship of the Hare Krishna movement with mainstream society: An alignment perspective

Angela Burt

Australian Catholic University

The Hare Krishna movement has experienced a changing relationship with mainstream society since its inception in 1966. Stark's (1996) theoretical model on how new religions succeed and a frame alignment perspective is used to interrogate this changing relationship. Key to Stark's theory is tension—"the degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the 'outside' world" (Stark and Finke, 2000, p. 127). This tension has characterized the Hare Krishna movement's relationship with its host communities throughout its history and an analysis using Stark's framework illuminates how and why the movement changed in its attitude to and relationship with wider society. Frame alignment as a concept has been used by scholars of religion to understand the ways in which people become and remain members of religious organizations. Snow et al. (1986, p. 464) define frame alignment as the phenomena of congruence and complementarity between individual interests, values and beliefs, and social movement activities, goals, and ideology. Frame alignment is necessary for participation in a movement, and a movement's members work to align the interests, values, and beliefs of potential recruits with the activities, goals, and ideology of the movement (Rochford, 2018, p. 36). Frame alignment explains why the movement's outreach and demographic makeup has changed significantly from a movement of westerners living a monastic lifestyle to a congregation-based movement increasingly inhabited by followers from Indian-Hindu backgrounds.

The movement's changing tension with wider society is evident in the nature of its disputes, which have transitioned from disputes with individuals and organizations external to the movement, to largely internal disputes, indicating an increased willingness to align with the cultural norms of mainstream society. Similarly, evolving proselytization methods that seek to cater to the tastes and inclinations of westerners indicate reduced tension and increased alignment with mainstream society's norms. Recent socio-political events including the rise of social media, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic have changed the landscape within which the movement is placed and to which it responds, forcing it to pivot yet again in negotiating its relationship with mainstream society.

Dialectics of narrative identity in the Hare Krishna stories of religious experience

Hrvoje Čargonja

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For the members of the Hare Krishna movement, a globally widespread form of contemporary Hinduism, realization is the word that signifies religious experience. Within the devotional framework of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, it connotes occasions of actualization of the relationship with divinity. Narratives of such realizations come in two distinct but often overlapping forms: as “ecstasies” and as “Krishna’s arrangements.” Ecstasies are reports with minimal plots replete with emotions and often mystical sensations. Arrangements are synchronicities, stories about a line of events seen upon reflection as orchestrated by God that always imply a personal need. Varied temporality suggests different roles these two narrative types play in Ricoeur’s dialectics of narrative identity. According to Ricoeur, identity as a form of permanence in time, has two distinct temporal aspects. One is sameness (*idem*) or permanence of dispositions, capacities, and distinctive marks, everything that makes a person recognizable as the same through time. The other is selfhood (*ipse*) or fidelity, loyalty to the self by which identity is cast outside of time towards its ideals. In the life stories of the Hare Krishna devotees, ecstasy narratives are expressions of selfhood. As occasions of intensified affectivity that imply a more immediate contact with divinity, stories of ecstasy are assertions of the true self, bringing life to the narrative identity and grounding it in its values. On the other hand, arrangement stories are testimonies to divine confirmations of personal devotional dispositions (sameness) expressed through the need implied in them, bringing stability and distinction to religious narrative identity. In this way, Ricoeur’s model of narrative identity uncovers how Hare Krishna devotees with their religious experience stories negotiate dialectics of their religious identity in contemporary society.

The Wonder of Darshan: Going Beyond the Local and the Visual

Tuhina Ganguly

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Derived from the Sanskrit root word “*drs*”, meaning vision or sight, *darshan* has been a topic of great interest in Hinduism studies. It has commonly been understood in scholarly work since Diana Eck’s (1998) seminal study on the practice and its philosophy as seeing and being seen by a deity. The notion of *darshan* and visual piety also extends to human guru-led movements where the ritual of *darshan* has a transformative impact on the devotees who “drink” the power of the guru (Babb 1981). The term also refers to philosophy or knowledge or insight. Thus, through *darshan* of the deity or guru, the devotee may gain true insight into the nature of reality and the self (Pinney 2004).

However, more recently, scholars have called in question such understandings of *darshan* as a typical Hindu practice of visual piety. *Darshan*, they argue, is not just an ocular practice, nor can it be considered a Hindu practice alone. It is situated within, and accompanied by wider and more complex sensorial fields including, for example, “inner auditory developments” (Babb 1981) and the corporeality of touch (Hawkins 1999; Lucia 2014). On the other front, treating *darshan* ahistorically makes it seem like a ubiquitously Hindu practice when it might have affinities with the Persian derived term of “*nazar lagna*” and other religions with similar practices (Cort 2012). While these are all welcome interventions in the conceptualisation of *darshan*, such critiques nonetheless frame *darshan* as an Indian or subcontinental phenomenon, leaving unaddressed *the transnational intersections of ideas, practices, and histories that shape modern darshan* in some contexts.

Based on fieldwork among Western spiritual practitioners in Pondicherry, the city home to Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the paper argues that *darshan* of the gurus in the Ashram cannot be understood as simply a Hindu or Indian practice. Rather it emerges as a modern practice demonstrating the workings of a much wider landscape of interconnected religio-spiritual ideas. Based on the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the French Mirra Alfassa or “Mother”, the practice of *darshan* in this context is understood through the intersections of neo- Vedantic and modern European occultist ideas. Juxtaposing my interlocutors’ narratives of having the Mother’s *darshan* with Sri Aurobindo’s and the Mother’s texts, I show how the wonderful practice of *darshan* (a total kinaesthetic practice) initiated them into the world of Integral Yoga.

Further, the practice in its phenomenological revelation of a radically altered self, attesting to the wondrous capacity of *darshan*, cannot be separated from the historical production of India as the very embodiment of radical alterity. The inner transformed interiority parallels the exterior transformation of the abstract notion of “spiritual India” into the concreteness of becoming the site of personal revelation.

Thus, the paper hopes to contribute to the recent calls to reconsider *darshan* as a typically Hindu ocular practice by situating it within longer and wider cross-currents of history and religious entanglements.

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Memorial Stones as social identity in the past

With special reference to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

Gowda Gomathi & Babu Lenin G

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The paper discusses various levels of engagement and identity formation for memorial stones that are specific to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The installation of statues and monuments to the dead is a centuries-old and global phenomenon that takes various forms. This millennia-old tradition of memorial stelae is still alive in India and continues to serve in an original cultural setting.

The eternalized hero and local legends that enhance the ordinary-looking slabs of stone as culturally significant pieces of history serve as the source that establishes the authenticity and the continuation of the act of reverence translated into an intangible culture. The structure, semantics, and function of memorial stones will be discussed from an art-historical perspective.

The whole symbolism of the hero-stones reproduces the concept of a fallen hero ascending to heaven to enjoy posthumous bliss in the company of the gods. Their design might be very simple, sometimes consisting only of a figure of a hero holding his weapons or a scene depicting combat with an enemy. Complex, multi-panelled compositions, on the other hand, are more prevalent. The paper discusses various levels of engagement and identity formation for memorial stones that are specific to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Keywords: Memorial stones, semantics, history, tradition, intangible culture

Rapture and Rupture: Experiences of Former Ashram Residents

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In this study we interviewed 40 former ashram residents, who had lived in Vaisnava-Hindu ashrams in either the UK, US, Australia or New Zealand for at least a year before the year 2000. The year 2000 or earlier was selected for participant inclusion to ensure that the members had been outside of the ashram environment for almost 20 years. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, with a balance of males and females. Findings were analysed using theories of narrative self and the social imaginary (Ricoeur, 1995; Castoriadis, 1975). Emergent narratives described ambivalent feelings of both gratitude for having had the experience as an ashram resident and all learned from the philosophy, rituals, community, values and a strong sense of meaning. Contrastingly, there were also narratives of painful experiences of life in a new and immature movement, where managers were little qualified for their roles, conditions were often austere, and individual needs were often neglected. There appeared to be a cognitive dissonance involving rapture and pain. On the one hand, many participants displayed faith in the teachings and an overriding respect for the founder guru. They also sustained practices involving vegetarianism, chanting, and varying degrees of participation with community activities and members. Having left the ashram long ago, many employed internal jargon unfamiliar to outsiders, despite the researchers' efforts to use neutral language. This all indicated that participants continued imaging themselves as "devotees" or "ashram members". Yet, on the other hand, very few of the entire participant cohort maintained active formal relationships with the institution due to a rupture with institutional authorities and expectations. Many described the interview as cathartic. Still, fear of being overly critical (even when invited to provide constructive criticism) appeared to be a concern for many, and in a couple of instances interviewees called back to clarify negative statements.

World Kirtan: Music and Spirituality in a Transcultural Whirlpool

Gustavo H. P. Moura

Wilfrid Laurier University

Kirtan (Sanskrit: कीर्तन; IAST: Kīrtana) is a broad term referring to the practice of singing mantras, scriptural passages, and devotional songs as commonly done in South Asia. It is a core practice in the Hindu and Sikh traditions that is becoming increasingly popular around the world among people of all ethnicities. Beyond its expected propagation within Hindu and Sikh diasporas, kirtan is also spreading among members of new religious movements such as ISKCON and the 3HO/Sikh Dharma, who engage with mantras daily. Even more broadly, kirtan has been gaining popularity in the Yoga and New Age communities, with several kirtan artists nominated for the Grammy awards over the years. Moreover, in the wake of the mindfulness and yoga movements, there is an emerging engagement of kirtan singers with public healthcare and correctional institutions. Thus, we can say that kirtan is developing as a transnational and transcultural phenomenon. Indeed, the broader cultural implications and deepening social penetration that this practice has achieved over the past five decades suggests that it is attaining permanent status in the world's religious soundscape. This research explores the practice of kirtan as it has been re-created outside of India through multi-sided interactions that generate new cultural patterns in an ongoing process of cross-pollination. Approaching mantras as a type of 'technology of the self', this project addresses the questions of how kirtan is adopted and adapted by contemporary practitioners and how this practice has been shaping identities, communities, and traditions. There seems to be a convergence of various groups around the performance of kirtan, despite their differences in terms of doctrine and authority. The popularization of the practice makes it accessible to many, but also presents risks of trivialization and alienation from its traditional roots. Above all, the centrality of kirtan for multiple religious communities now present around the globe invites scholars of religion to investigate its relevance as spiritual practice and its role in community formation.

Keywords: mantra, kirtan, yoga, bhakti, music, new religious movements, transculturation.

Finding the One: Marriage and Love among Hindus in the UK

Priyesh Patel

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A major sociological challenge facing many young British Hindus is finding a life partner. Marriage and family are considered among the most important institutions for the perpetuation of religious traditions, particularly in Western communities. This paper aims to explore the Hindu marriage 'market' in the UK and understand the contemporary dynamics around finding partners. I ask: What does marriage mean to young British Hindus? What constitutes the ideal partner? How do individuals balance their own preferences with family expectations? How and why is religion relevant to this choice? How do young British Hindus go about beginning the overwhelming task of trying to find a partner? What are some of their frustrations and disappointments around relationships? Through surveys and interviews, I hope to begin a conversation which scholarship, and perhaps the Hindu community at large, are at risk of neglecting. New waves of migration from India can often hide the underlying reality that British-born Hindus are struggling to find the right partners within the community (with the same religion, language or other defining feature). 'Biodata' is often requested by informal matchmakers within the community, taking the form of a brief document containing a picture and key information about the individual. Such documents themselves are interesting sources in understanding how young Hindus present themselves in the 'marriage market'.

Menski (1986) is one of the only studies focusing on marriage in British Hinduism, exploring how the legal system shapes Hindu wedding ceremonies. She notes that despite the civil ceremony being the 'real' ceremony, the symbolic Hindu ceremony was what truly officiated the marriages in the eyes of the wider Hindu community, and that this protected the ideal that marriage is far more than a mere contract between two individuals. No studies exist which focus on how young Hindus select their partners. Some studies exist from urban Indian cities such as Kolkata (Donner 2016) and Tirrupur (De Neve 2016) which I seek to apply to the British context.

Donner (2016) finds that many young people opt for a 'self-chosen arranged marriage' whereby they filter candidates based on family expectations. For instance, one of her respondents reveal: "If I am seeing someone that is only possible if he is also acceptable to my parents." Here, Donner argues match making is a collaborative process where cultural norms and family acceptance forms the criteria when going about 'choosing for oneself'. Sometimes, marriage was seen as 'too serious to be based on emotion alone' and that love ideally should not be the 'main basis of marriage' to the detriment of somebody's professional or family background (Donner 2016).

I argue that the young British Hindus face two challenges which must be addressed: a dearth of platforms through which to find a broad range of potential matches, and perhaps confusing cultural expectations from their family or community when trying to find a partner. It is imperative that the Hindu community becomes more invested in this issue and that cultural change occurs whereby the risk of Hindus losing their

religious traditions and cultural roots due to marriage-induced assimilation is increasingly high.

Acting in the Underground: Life as a Hare Krishna Devotee in the Republic of Lithuania (1979-1989)

Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson

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The research focuses on the origins and early development of the Hare Krishna community (also known as ISKCON, International Society for Krishna Consciousness) in Lithuania until 1989, when the collapse of the Soviet Union began. The aim of the research is to reveal the situation in which ISKCON found itself in Lithuania under the Soviet regime until the Society's official registration in 1989, focusing on life as a Krishna devotee under the threat of KGB. Using a historical narrative method, the formation of ISKCON is retraced as well as how the movement came to Lithuania from Moscow, Russia through Tallinn, Estonia and Riga, Latvia. The material in the paper is derived mainly from Lithuanian ISKCON archives, as well as, from the previously secret documents of the State Security Committee of the Lithuanian SSR (KGB) on Lithuanian Hare Krishnas, which are now preserved in the Lithuanian Special Archives (LSA).

The community developed within the underground under the threat of KGB repressions where it existed until the beginning of the Sąjūdis (the Reform Movement of Lithuania), when public community activities became possible -, such as public programs, religious book distribution and the founding of official temples. The ideas and practices of ISKCON were a form of resistance to the Soviet regime and the communist ideology. It did not emerge as an open opposition towards the prevalent communist ideology, but its actions appeared more as an attempt to exist in a suppressive sociocultural environment. The Lithuanian ISKCON community played a significant role in the development of ISKCON throughout the Soviet Union, because, after the imprisonment of Armenian activists, Lithuanian members organized secret printing and distribution of ISKCON literature throughout the Soviet region.

Hinduism and Creole Cultural Memory in Present-day Mauritius

Sraddha Shivani Rajkomar

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The Indian Ocean island of Mauritius is home to hundreds of thousands of diasporic Hindus who ensure that their religious practices remain vibrant to this day and connected to what I have called 'the divineland of India' in my publications. The premise of this concept is that India was more than homeland or ancestral land for the Indian indentured labourers who were displaced en masse to the island following the abolition of slavery in 1835, and the establishment of indenture as the British Raj's 'great experiment' with seemingly mobile and cheap labour that could replace slaves of mostly African and Malagasy origins in sugar plantation estates. Indentured labourers brought their religious practices, including what is often described as village or popular Hinduism, to Mauritius. They also brought their sacred texts, most notably the *Ramacaritmanas* which, more than any other, prompted Hindu Indo-Mauritians to start viewing India as the land where not only their ancestors, but their divinities also lived and moved around in challenging circumstances, bestowing upon it the status of divineland. With increased contact between India and Mauritius in the early 20th century, various Hindu movements relocated and spread their activities in the island, warranting that Hinduism and its many branches or modes of practice are safeguarded and thrive.

Yet, the success-story of Hinduism's survival in Mauritius has also had exclusionary meanings for a society that was and remains inherently creole due to plantation history, and where Hindus themselves were once subaltern and suffered from exclusionary discourses. Using Caribbean thinking on creolisation and Jan Assmann's work on cultural memory, I have argued in my recent research that cultural memory in Mauritius cannot be any other than creole, and that Hinduism itself cannot escape the organic impetus of creolisation. This, I have concluded based on examinations of fictional, non-fictional as well as anthropological material that do not, in fact, clash with Hindu philosophy and need not cause a fear of creolisation or impurity that racial and ethnic discourses around the 'Other' have exacerbated, contributing to tragic consequences for the cultural memory of non-Hindus in Mauritius.

My argument is that creole cultural memory exists and can emerge as a theoretical trend reflecting reality in colonial and contemporary Mauritian society, for non-exclusionary purposes and reparation towards colonialism's subalterns. This creole cultural memory has the potential of showcasing the dynamism and profundity of Hinduism as articulated in its sacred texts, as well as that of other religious and sacred traditions. It highlights that Hinduism need not be in competition with ongoing efforts to protect it from contact with people of other religious and ethnic backgrounds - and ensuing social practices like inter-religious marriage - in highly multicultural spaces where maintaining social cohesion is a key mission. Although this certainly appears simpler where Hinduism remains the religion of the majority, as is the case in Mauritius, creole cultural memory can be a productive tool at least in other creole contexts, due

to the yearning for survival and creativity that naturally characterises creolisation, and despite the destructive conditions that birthed it.

Cultural Identity and Cultural Memory at Kāmākhyā: A Preliminary Study

Paolo E. Rosati

Independent Scholar

The village of Kāmākhyā is a sacred spot on Nīlācala in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Its presiding goddess is Kāmākhyā who is worshipped in the non-anthropomorphic shape of a *yoni* (vulva) stone through left-hand and right-hand tantric rites. It is the *yoni* of Satī that according to the Śākta Purāṇas, a group of texts compiled in Bengal and Assam during the medieval period, fell to Nīlācala. Nowadays, the cult of Kāmākhyā is a cross-cultural system of religious beliefs and rituals interconnected to the village community. During the colonial period, the public *yoni pūjā* (worship) was exotericized and sanitized from its extreme Kaula praxis (Urban 2009). So today, animals are not sacrificed inside the sanctum but only outside of it while, from an etic point of view, the *yoni* symbol seems desexualized. Nevertheless, animal slaughtering and *yoni pūjā* replicates the mythic death and rebirth of Satī, the event that stands at the origin of Kāmākhyā. The inhabitants of the village of Kāmākhyā (i.e. Kamakhyans), thus, share the same symbolic universe and preserve the medieval Kaula roots of the *yoni* cult through daily ritual life.

This paper will shed light on the fundamental role that ritual praxis plays in the preservation of the cultural memory at Kāmākhyā whereas written tradition influenced what may be defined religious oblivion to normalize the ritual praxis. In conclusion, this paper aims to outline a relationship between the cultural memory and the cultural identity of Kamakhyans and their medieval Kaula roots.

Russo-Ukrainian War and Problems of Violence Justification Among Russian and Ukrainian Vaishnavas

Michael Sheludko, Deacon (Kyiv, Ukraine)

Head of the Eparchial Commission for Promoting Christian Unity, Pereyaslav and Vyshneve eparchy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine

Establisher of the सत्यधर्मपथ: Satya Dharma Path – A Hindu-Christian Initiative for Dialogue

The Russo-Ukrainian war started in 2014 with the seizure of Crimea by the troops of the Russian Federation, but the most intense phase of the war began on February 24, 2022. The Ukrainian people are giving a decisive rebuff and fighting operations of this scale have not been carried out in Europe since the Second World War. The Hindu community in the countries that were part of the Soviet Union before 1991 is mainly represented by various Gaudiya Vaishnava missions, which were practically unified until February 2022. Some Vaishnava missions, such as Sri Chaitanya Saraswat Math, were directly run by leaders from Russia, and others, like ISKCON, had their own Ukrainian administration, but were quite strongly integrated with the Russian Federation and other post-Soviet countries. After the laws restricting the freedom of preaching were tightened in Russia, festivals and congresses of Russian-speaking Vaishnavas began to be held in Ukraine. The impression was formed that the Vaishnavas of the entire post-Soviet space constituted a single organization. The language of inter-Vaishnava communication was Russian, however, everything started to change after February 2022.

In general, the full-scale war confused the minds of Russian and Ukrainian Vaishnavas and raised questions to which they had no ready answers. Despite the unfriendly attitude of the Russian state representatives towards Vaishnavas, their regular persecution, lawsuits, restrictions on religious freedom and missionary activity, the majority of the Russian Vaishnavas are supporting the actions of Vladimir Putin's government. By quoting scriptures, they justify the actions of Russian troops in Ukraine and encourage their soldiers to further violence. The image of the enemy, which has been planted in Russia for years, is used as an excuse for "preventive" aggression; the spiritless "collective West" opposes "the spiritual Russian civilization".

On the other hand, the Ukrainian devotees of all missions are practically united in condemning the aggression against their people and state. The most authoritative Ukrainian Vaishnavas call for defending their country with weapons in their hands, and Ukrainian Vaishnavas criticize those who want to remain neutral. In addition, some Russian-speaking Ukrainian Vaishnavas have begun to defiantly switch to Ukrainian, even if they did not attach any importance to this before. There was a split, and in some missions they started talking about the need to separate from the Russian control center of the organization.

The position of the leaders who condemned or supported Putin's actions impacts the attitude of their followers towards them. Considering that a number of leaders have the status of initiating gurus, the problem is not so much social as theological. Both

obedience and disobedience to a guru, according to the teachings of the Vaishnavas, directly affects the spiritual life of his disciples. The 21st century poses new challenges for the Vaishnava community, and the pacifist rhetoric that has characterized it all these years has been subjected to the biggest test of its existence.

Contemporary Hindu Woman: Strangled soul or an emancipated one?

Richa Shukla

Assistant Professor of Philosophy
OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India

I am a woman of color, coming from a diverse country named India. I owe thanks to my family for a cosmopolitan background in Benaras (Varanasi), the oldest city in the world, where I was born and brought up, which taught me about the co-existence of multiple cultures. Speaking three to four Indian languages made me understand how beautiful the canon becomes when we have people from different genders, races, castes, ethnicities, and religions. Later, Bombay (now known as Mumbai) played a pivotal role in shaping my understanding of the self and Other. My neighborhood was full of people from different communities, whether it was Parsis (Zoroastrians), Portuguese Christians or Konkani (a term used for the fisherman community in Mumbai), or Marathis. It exposed to me the beautiful rich literary world of words by great social reformers and poets. All these added layers shaped me when I decided to become a student of philosophy.

Hindu philosophy has long been debated, critiqued, and dismissed. Debated and critiqued as one of the core scriptural Hindu values. Dismissed as it has been painted as a monolithic category that has nothing to offer apart from spiritualism and abstraction. Whether it's the Rig-Veda,¹ *The Ramayana* or *The Mahabharata*,² all these can be considered as a valid carrier of epistemology; not because they give us a glimpse of who we used to be and where are we coming from, but also because if we do a symptomatic reading of these texts, it gives us an idea of 'Who can be a knower?' and 'Who has been a knower/ subject?' All this stands in contradiction when we see how Hinduism is being propagated.

The present work shall use auto-ethnography as a tool to untangle the web of contemporary Indian women. As a philosopher, I rely on my 'lived-experience' as a contemporary Indian woman, and that shall be reflected in the paper. Between the lived experience and theoretically how it has been described in the scriptures, the void that still exists in the contemporary Indian society shall be addressed.

During Vedic times, a distinction has been made between two categories of women: *brahma vadini* (scholarly women who didn't get married and choose to dedicate their life to knowledge and wisdom) and *rajaswala* (women who belong to the realm of domesticity, reproduce, and have family). My work seeks to investigate both the categories and investigate the latter in terms of their presence, dissent, and responsibilities. By invoking the latter category, I shall discuss the conflicted issues in the contemporary Hindu society like, menstruation, marriage and most importantly, the life of a Hindu woman. This paper shall aim to understand Hindu women theoretically and empirically; how ideas have been defined in Hindu scriptures and how they are being practiced.