The Art of Exchange: 
Circulation of Visual Culture in Colonial India

By Dipti Khera and Yuthika Sharma

The day-long invited symposium, held on Saturday, October 28, 2006, was conceptualized by faculty and graduate students in Indian art history and sponsored by the Southern Asian Institute and co-sponsored by the Department of Art History and Archaeology. The symposium brought together nine scholars with interrelated interests in colonial South Asia’s visual culture. The papers collectively addressed cross-cultural interactions between Britain and India in the age of imperialism in order to advance the study of visual culture in the colonial period. In an age of increasing global travel the circulation of material objects challenged the notion that culture could be confined by space. The notion of ‘exchange’ offered a broad rubric within which to interpret the connected histories of movement and ‘visual culture’ in colonial India. In light of renewed debates on the role of individual subjects and nature of knowledge production in 18th and 19th century South Asia, this symposium provided an ideal forum for a dialogue across disciplines. Presentations by art/architecture historians and responses by faculty from history, art history, comparative literature, and anthropology departments at Columbia provided for a day of vigorous discussions on the contested imaginings of the visual in colonial India.

Vidya Dehejia, in her welcome note, proposed that the symposium would further the scholarship on how the dynamics of colonialism inflected artistic production and its formalization in British India. In the first panel of the day, papers by Indira Peterson and Douglas Fordham addressed the circulation of ideas, styles, and motifs in painting. Peterson pointed to the use of

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“heightened naturalism” in the portraits of the Maratha king Serfoji by artists at the Tanjavur court. She saw Serfoji as a modern enlightenment figure represented in his portraits as a blend between a divine icon and a royal figure. Analyzing Thomas Daniell’s grand durbar painting of the Treaty of 1790 between Charles Malet and Narrain Peshwa, Douglas Fordham traced the artist’s deployment of “costume” and ritual objects as material indices of sovereignty as well as aesthetic devices. Fordham situated the use of costume as a metropolitan aesthetic as well as an ethnographic sign in terms of its semiotic role in an artist’s narrative. For example, Fordham argued that in James Wales’s full-length portrait of the Peshwa, the artist’s struggle lay between balancing of taste based on Reynoldsian principles and the insistence on representation of detail (costume and ritual objects) by Maratha patrons. Raising questions around Peterson’s use of “frontality” as an attribute of modernity in Serfoji’s portrait, Sheldon Pollock in his response suggested thinking about possible disjunctions between cognitive modernity in terms of individual expression, and visual modernity. In problematizing what “newness” in visual paradigms meant in this time period, Pollock proposed studying the processes by which Indian and English artists were directed to paint thus complicating the modernist assumptions of Serfoji’s portraiture. Sheldon Pollock pointed to the role of shifting sovereignties that allowed a slippage between “costume” and “custom” in such artistic representations, which were key to understanding the intersections between ethnography and history in the aesthetic realm.

In the second panel of the day, Natasha Eaton’s paper elaborated on gifting and display practices of portraits within the regional courts of Lucknow and Arcot in the late 18th century. Eaton’s paper explored the polarity between the notions of a gift and a commodity that, according to her, were interchangeable and relational in nature. She argued that mimetic gifting practices by donors and recipients, both Indian and British, resulted in the reconfiguration of the symbolic terrain of courtly etiquette and diplomacy. Eaton emphasized portraiture’s involvement in a mimetic rivalry between the two where “mimesis was mimicked” producing an excess of meaning in the aesthetic realm. In the following paper relating circulation of aesthetic concepts to space, Arindam Dutta’s paper explored the role of the pragmatic and romantic aspects of landscape thought at the turn of the 18th and into 19th century India. In his paper, Dutta stressed that the agricultural policies of British physiocrats in India could not be understood solely as policies implemented on ground in a purely pragmatic manner, but that they were often negotiated through romantic frameworks. Using the baganbaris of Bengal as an example of the landed estate in India, Dutta suggested that the ha-ha (natural barrier in gardens) was a frame for the picturesque and functioned both an aesthetic as well as architectonic model. Challenging the purely ideological, political reading of the picturesque as a homogenizing trope Dutta asked if we could recover anti-formalized, nostalgic and romantic notions from within such frames. In the discussion, Nicholas Dirks reminded the audience that such modes of representation indicated a gradual realization and transformation of colonial power. He pointed out that despite being born out of gifts and exchange, the notions of debt and credit were often unidirectional in the colonial economy owing in most part to the misapprehension of such “codes of Mughal sovereignty” on the part of British administrators. In the afternoon session on institutional practices and craft culture, Deepali Dewan’s paper studied the movement of objects in the broader British Empire within colonies of India and Canada. Against the backdrop of the intersection of institutional frameworks, the formulation of ideas about art, and
The 2007 Barbara Stoler Miller Lecture on April 23rd offered the Southern Asian Institute the opportunity to host Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Professor of History at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, and distinguished scholar of the history and historiography of art and visual culture in modern and contemporary India. Prof. Guha-Thakurta’s lecture, “The Blurring of Distinctions: The Cross Destinies of India’s Artistic and Religious Icons,” sought to problematize the separation in present-day India between categories such as sacred and secular, religious and artistic. Fittingly for the occasion, Guha-Thakurta acknowledged Barbara Stoler Miller’s essay on Stella Kramrisch (in Miller’s edited volume Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch [1983]) for stimulating her own thoughts about the intermingling of the secular and the devotional. In her consideration of three bodies of visual material and practice that complicate the division between secular art and religious imagery, Guha-Thakurta presented a thought-provoking discussion on the intersection of religious and artistic practices.

Part one of Prof. Guha-Thakurta’s lecture considered the controversy surrounding artist M. F. Husain’s representations of nude or seminude female figures labeled with the names of specific goddesses such as Saraswati and Bharat-Mata. Since the 1990s, right-wing Hindu nationalists have attacked Husain for such images, representing the artist—an iconic figure of India’s secular modern art world—as a specifically Muslim artist who has sexually violated Hindu goddesses. This response to Husain’s art, and the counter-response it has provoked in defense of the artist, has exposed what Guha-Thakurta calls the “shrinking space of artistic authority and autonomy” in contemporary India. During the lecture and in response to a comment made by Jack Hawley, who compared Husain’s situation to that of scholars such as James Laine, who have been targeted by the Hindu right, Guha-Thakurta emphasized the irony of arguments made in defense of Husain that have, in the face of the popular ideal of an India firmly rooted in a particular notion of tradition, been forced to marginalize the modernist ideals of freedom of expression and transgression of the past. Rather than affirming these principles, Husain’s primary tactic in defending himself against his attackers has been to apologize for any unintended offense, and his supporters have invoked the legitimacy of nude (or seminude) female figures in premodern Indian (Continued on page 9)
Housing for the Poor—Summer Internship with UNDP in India

By Anna Somos
SIPA, Masters in International Affairs 2007

Last summer, I had the most rewarding internship opportunity: to work with the United Nations Development Program and DHFL (Dewan Housing Finance Ltd) on microhousing in India. My duties were to identify a business opportunity in low-income housing and prepare a case analysis for the UNDP Growing Sustainable Business Initiative (GSB). The GSB explores development solutions that are commercially sustainable. In the case of microhousing, this means that instead of providing shelter for free, financed from government subsidies and/or grants, we give housing loans for the borrowers accompanied by technical assistance. This solution allows introducing various financing methods (microfinance is one possible way), it makes the model flexible and predictable on the long run. Since there are hardly any loan-based initiatives in India at the moment, we conducted market research and evaluated current projects, to determine our baseline and the exact needs of the rural and urban communities.

As a SIPA student I couldn’t even dream of a better internship opportunity, because while I got to see the grassroots level of development, I also had to interact with UN officials and meet the private sector executives. This was the key learning of my summer; it is not enough to be familiar and sympathize with challenges of the underprivileged communities, but in order to help them we need to win the private sector to invest in them. This facilitation should be the ultimate role of the development practitioners and this is the mission that the GSB unit of the UNDP fulfills.

On the project level, probably the biggest accomplishment was that the largest private commercial bank of India, ICICI, became interested in piloting microhousing, in collaboration with the Center of Development Finance (CDF) in Chennai together with the Gates Foundation and Development Innovations Group from Washington DC. On a personal level, I felt honored that the UNDP country office in India invited me for a 10-day workshop, 3 weeks upon my return to New York, to help them finalize the next strategy plan on private sector development.

Be it the UN, the private sector, or most importantly the communities themselves. All future interns should be ready to have their “own agenda” and loads of courage to realize concrete actions. Always rely on local resources because they are truly the best. People in the field know exactly what help they need, so listen to them carefully.

Good luck everyone!

As a message to the next generation of SIPA students, I would encourage anyone not to be frightened to undertake a project in the developing world. Every day we spend in the field and understand the reality, leads to countless new ideas and development solutions. There are tremendous opportunities if someone taps into developing markets with these new ideas and as long as the development impact is positive, everyone in the professional arena is more than happy to cooperate and contribute to our work.

Anna Somos with children whose parents are participating in the new housing loan program
the dynamics of multiple colonialisms, Dewan’s paper used the example of a carved wooden door as an object lesson in order to trace its journey within different discursive spaces – of archaeology, exhibitions, and museums in India and Canada. Abigail McGowan’s paper examined the development of carpet weaving in western India drawing attention to the troubled birth of design as a field and to the centrality of economics to aesthetic questions in late colonial India. Focusing on the reinvention of the idea of an “Indian” carpet McGowan’s paper highlighted the factory-craft styled production of carpets in the binding space of jails and their role in constructing taste. In her response to the papers, Janaki Bakhle began by historicizing the parallel political and social conditions with a view to raise awareness about the preoccupation with “authenticity” in both political and museum discourses. Bakhle complicated the liberal and conservative ideologies at work in the metropole to highlight the role of capital and its materialization in the cultural sphere. Questions about the status of the jailed craftsman as a “whole” individual or as alienated labor and the unidirectional nature of artistic “exchange” were raised in the discussion that followed.

The final panel of the day began with Susan Bean’s paper on clay modelers’ production of portraiture and social commentary in early 19th century Calcutta. Her paper recalled art practices in which sculptors and painters from traditional art-making lineages responded to the increasingly cosmopolitan artscape of Calcutta. Using works primarily preserved in a museum collection, her paper highlighted the extent to which artists from traditional backgrounds and their patrons led the way toward the 19th century transformation of visual culture in the decades before the dominant emergence of colonial institutions and the new elite art movement. The next paper by Saloni Mathur focused on the anthropological category of the “Indian village” in visual and aesthetic terms based on its display in the metropolitan space of late 19th century London’s Liberty department store. Her paper looked at Indian crafts as a “living village of Indian artisans” in relation to contemporaneous exhibits of the Indian village in World Exhibitions as well as in the context of early 20th century nationalist claims on the reified figure of the Indian craftsman. Responding to Mathur’s gesture towards post-colonial concerns on craft, Partha Chatterjee asked if the somewhat failed experiments with the display of Indian villages in the 19th century department stores were in fact made successful in the 1980s Festivals of India. In the final paper for the day, Barry Flood presented a view into the indigenous reception of historical and scientific claims in James Fergusson’s architectural and photographic document, Archaeology in India from 1884. His paper elaborated upon the context and sub-text of the work illuminating the broader socio-cultural matrices, such as the Indigo crisis and the Ilbert Bill that shaped the tenuous relationship between Fergusson and noted Bengali scholar Babu Rajendralal Mitra. Partha Chatterjee’s response centered on the question of native agency and claims of scientificity outside the colonial paradigm. Addressing Bean’s paper, he highlighted the unconventional nature of art in clay that, in transgressing the strict disciplinary conditions of religious art, challenged ideas of virtuosity and a conventional definition of “art” versus “craft.” Overall, he pointed towards the importance of local archives in alternative spheres of cultural production in order to identify possibilities of other modernities.

The presentations in the Art of Exchange symposium opened ways to think about ‘exchange’ in aesthetic and political spheres. Beyond the monolithic notion of the British-Indian empire, the analyses drew attention to contemporaneous critical perspectives and ongoing negotiations in the political, artistic, and cultural spheres at multiple sites such as in princely courts, colonial cities, and metropolitan institutions. The papers encouraged a discussion in terms of “history made by art” rather than history of art, as has been iterated by Christopher Pinney in his work on late 19th and 20th century visual culture of India.
Fall 2006 Brown Bag Series

September 13th
Brown Bag Summer Internship Panel
“Summer in South Asia”
Anna Somos, Rahul Gupta, Behzad Noubary, Sonia Mistry, Sarah Rizvi
SIPA internship experiences in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan working with UNDP, UNIFEM, private consulting groups, and local NGOs

September 20th
Brown Bag Talk
“Education Programs in Afghanistan: Assessing the Impact of Aid to Education”
Dr. Dana Burde, Associate Research Scholar at the Saltzman Institute of War & Peace Studies at Columbia University. Her research focuses on education in emergencies and as a tool for social reconstruction in post-conflict regions.

September 27th
Brown Bag Film Screening
Born into Brothels, by Ross Kaufman and Zana Briski, Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

October 2nd
Brown Bag Presentation
“The Mystery of Intangible Capital – Bridging the Economic Divide in India”
Unni Krishnan, Country Manager for Brand-Finance India

October 11th
Brown Bag Short Films
“Shared Culture, Literature, and Music in South Asia”
Short Films by Yousuf Saeed: Khayal Darpan, Muharram, Basant

October 18th
Brown Bag Illustrative Lecture
“Mother India: Politics of the Nation” 1905-2000
Geeti Sen, art historian

November 1st
Brown Bag Poetry Reading
“Terrain Tracks”
Purvi Shah, Executive Director of Sakhi for South Asian Women, read from her collection of poetry, Terrain Tracks, which won the 2005 Many Voices Project Prize.

November 8th
Brown Bag Documentary Screening
“Maoist Insurgency and Human Rights Crisis in Nepal”
Tulsi Bhandari, MSW, Nepali social worker and human rights activist

November 13th
Brown Bag Lecture
“Regulators Role in Reforming the Indian Power Sector”
Dr. Pramod Deo, Chairman, Maharashtra Electricity Regulatory Commission

November 15th
Brown Bag Lecture
“Ruins and Recollections: Memory, Historicity and ‘Development’”
Vyjayanthi Rao, Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at The New School

November 29th
Brown Bag Event
“Film Screening of Paris, Autumn, a short film by Pushpamala N.”
Followed by Q&A with the Director and artist, Pushpamala N.

December 6th
Brown Bag Talk
“Navigating Development and Change: The Maldives in the 21st Century”
Donovan Storey, Senior Lecturer in Development Studies at Massey University, New Zealand
Spring 2007 Brown Bag Series

January 24th
Brown Bag Lecture
“Anti-Corruption Activism in India”
Rob Jenkins, Professor of Political Science at Birkbeck College, University of London and Visiting Senior Fellow at Ralph Bunch Institute for International Studies at CUNY Graduate Center

January 31st
Brown Bag Lunch Talk
“Circuits of Subjectivity: Testimony of Living Proof”
Dr. Ethel Brooks, Assistant Professor of Women and Gender Studies and Sociology at Rutgers University

February 7th
Brown Bag Presentation
“The Gujurat Progroms: Sacrifice, Anger, and Vegetarianism”
Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Religion and Media at NYU

February 14th
Brown Bag Presentation
“National E-Governance in India: Improving services to citizens through ICT”
Gaurav Gujral, SIPA 2nd year MPA

February 21st
Brown Bag Lecture
“Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Reproductive Heteronormativity”
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, University Professor, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Center for Comparative Literature and Society

February 28th
Brown Bag Discussion
“Hindus and Muslims in the work of Mohammad Iqbal”
Faisal Devji, Assistant Professor in History, The New School

March 26th
MEALAC and SAI Brown Bag Lecture
“Recovering a Missing Voice: The Imperial Discourse of Jahangir (1606-1627)”
Corinne Lefevre-Agrati, Ahmanson-Getty Fellow,

UCLA Center for 17th- & 18th-Century Studies.

March 28th
Urban Policy and SAI Brown Bag Documentary Screening and Conversation with the Directors
Saacha (The Loom)
With Directors K. P. Jayasankar and Anjali Montiero

April 4th
Brown Bag Talk
“Ambiguous Lives: violence against Dalit Women”
Jebaroja Singh, Assistant Professor in Women Studies at William Paterson University, NJ and is author of The Spotted Goddess: The Dalit Woman in Classical Brahminical Literature, and in Modern Fiction, Memoirs and Songs from Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh.

April 11th
Brown Bag Book Reading
“Playing Lions and Tigers: An epic tale of Sri Lanka”
Rohini Hensman, novelist, researcher, activist

April 12th
MEALAC and SAI Brown Bag Lecture
“Shadows: On Shri Harsha’s Sanskrit Court Epic, the Nai-shadhacarita”
Charles Malamoud, Professor Emeritus of Indian Religions, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris

April 18th
Department of Religion and SAI Brown Bag Lecture
“Bhakti Movements and Dalit Protests”
Gail Omvedt, renowned sociologist and most recently author of Ambedkar: Toward an Enlightened India (2004), and Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste (2003).
bronzes to the exhibition, and India only three, it was all the more imperative that India do better the next time around! Since securing loans from India had become a truly sensitive and tricky issue, museum authorities were greatly encouraged by her remarks. Posters and publicity for the exhibition in and around London was extensive and took me by surprise – I guess London really had not had an “Indian” exhibition since the days of the Raj! It was a pleasure to tour the exhibition with a Columbia alumni group based in London.

While on the subject of “art,” I must mention the Institute’s Fall 2006 symposium “The Art of Exchange,” which focused on the circulation of visual culture in colonial India. Details of the papers are in the newsletter, but here I’d like to mention that one of the motivations for the symposium was to lay the ground for an exhibition of colonial silver, planned for display in the Wallach Gallery in Columbia’s department of Art History and Archaeology. While I am coordinating the exhibition and the catalogue, this is a joint project organized with the participation of graduate students doing their PhD. in the field of Indian Art.

I am disappointed that we have still not secured a replacement for the Quaid-e-Azam professorship in Pakistan Studies. We welcome all avenues of approach to the authorities concerned as we make a concerted appeal to the embassy in Washington DC, urging them to act on our suggested list of intellectuals whom we would be delighted to welcome to campus.

On the other hand, Tamil language studies at Columbia received a considerable boost with the arrival of Sam Sudhananda. Professor Sudhananda came to us from the American College in Madurai and has had an enthusiastic welcome from students.

During the year, a number of renowned scholars – David Shulman, V. Narayana Rao, Kamala Vishveswaran, Jitendra Mohanty, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Aijaz Ahmad – presented stimulating addresses in the Institute’s Distinguished Lecture Series, the Barbara Stoler Miller Lecture, and the Mary Keating Das Lecture. In addition, we were pleased to have the opportunity to co-sponsor events with the department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Culture, the Heyman Center for the Humanities, and Barnard’s department of Religion. “Chai and Chat,” initiated with the intention of bringing students and faculty together, has proved to be a success and will be a continuing feature, while the popularity of the Friday Film Series suggests that it too be considered as a regular feature of our more informal activities.

Assistant Director, Zainab Mahmood, organized two major outreach courses during the academic year. “Religions of South Asia,” certified for a “P” credit by the New York city system, was a career advancement course for school teachers. The second, “Islam in South Asia and the Middle East,” was co-sponsored by Columbia’s Middle East Institute. In the future, it is our hope to make such courses available on-line.

On a regretful note, we must say goodbye to Ann Levy who has been our invaluable office manager for the past three years. Having completed her Masters in International Education Development from Teachers College, she is leaving for India on a year’s fellowship from the American Indian Foundation. While there, she will be working with an NGO on education issues in the field of primary (K – 12) education. We wish her the very best of luck in her future career.

A final comment relates to the subject of funding. With the cut-back in Title VI funds from the Federal Department of Education, our sole source of funding, the need to secure support from outside sources becomes increasingly evident. We welcome your suggestions to help maintain our position as a premier resource for education on South Asia, and to strengthen and construct a vibrant community for the exchange of varied ideas and diverse opinions.
temples and Western art, thereby situating Husain’s work in established traditions.

The controversy surrounding M. F. Husain exposes a cleft between an elite public sphere comprised of galleries and auction houses invested with the authority to define art, and a popular domain that would prefer, for instance, a calendar print of a softly aestheticized and fully dressed Saraswati by Raja Ravi Varma over M. F. Husain’s more linear nude. In the second part of her lecture, Guha-Thakurta transitioned to an artistic arena that is principally determined by popular taste: the Durga Puja in Calcutta. During this annual festival, each neighborhood sponsors a themed tableau with a Durga icon at its center; the production and viewing of the tableaus have become a dominant part of the festival, and professional event managers often handle its organization.

In her discussion of the blurred boundaries in the Durga Puja tableaus, Guha-Thakurta focused on two artists with very different approaches. Sanatan Dinda maintains that his images are meant for worship, and his richly aestheticized Himalayan-style images are submerged at the end of the Puja. In contrast to Dinda, Bhabatosh Sutar uses Durga Puja as an arena to showcase his work and to gain exposure as an artist. Often designing tableaus in contemporary folk styles that appeal to a nostalgia for localized craft traditions, his icons are created in comparatively durable materials such as terracotta and wood. Worshipped during the Puja itself, his Durga images are not consigned to the river, but instead are often sold to collectors and institutions for display after the conclusion of the festival.

Guha-Thakurta spoke of the ambiguity of such post-Puja Durgas which seem to acquire liminal identities “as icons whose religious lives have passed” and as art objects yet to be fully defined as such; significantly, it is not until after the Puja that such a separation between religious icon and artwork is forced upon the images.

In the final part of her lecture, Guha-Thakurta returned to the elite art world with the contemporary Bangalore-based artist Pushpamala N. Trained in Baroda during the 1980s, Pushpamala is part of India’s 20th century art establishment, even as she challenges its own modernist principles. Pushpamala’s work is typified by her various photographic series documenting her enactment, of familiar images of women from India’s past, be they colonial ethnographic photographs, elite paintings from the 17th century, or modern popular prints. Guha-Thakurta focused on two performances in which Pushpamala enacted modern images of goddesses, thereby turning her own image into an icon. However, Pushpamala deliberately disrupts her close citation of Ravi Varma’s Gaja-Lakshmi and Tagore’s Bharat-Mata with insertions that undermine the “original” images, thereby simultaneously transgressing the works of her predecessors and her own “secular” modern heritage. While her iconicity is not religious in the ritualized manner of the Durga icons of Calcutta, in the setting of her own tableaus Pushpamala becomes an icon in a way that blurs presumed distinctions between religious and artistic, art object and artist. Such iconicity in the modern context more often than not implies a certain iconoclasm against prior values. It is this arrogant character of modern art practice—which not only blurs but often breaks existing boundaries—that Guha-Thakurta finds Husain forced to curtail, the Durga Puja artists yet to gain, and Pushpamala to enact.

The post-lecture discussion addressed Calcutta’s Durga Puja in relation to other festivals in metropolitan and suburban environments, patronage and selection of the Durga Puja artists and class distinctions between Calcutta’s different neighborhoods, and the performative dimensions of the visual practices discussed.
Circulatory Processes between North and South India in the Early Modern Period

By Anna Seastrand

On January 28, 2007, scholars from a broad variety of specialties and institutions gathered to discuss cultural exchanges and connections between northern and southern India. The seminar, *Circulatory Processes between North and South India in the Early Modern Period*, was organized by Professors Allison Busch and Jack Hawley, and the discussion was structured by four different presentations. Each of the presentations was used to address “circulatory processes” from a range of perspectives. Over the course of the afternoon participants in the seminar explored numerous instances of movements, interactions, connections, borrowings, and adaptations as they considered various aspects of the work presented.

The first presentation, given by David Shulman (University of Chicago/Hebrew University) and Velcheru Narayana Rao (University of Wisconsin), considered *The Pada in South India*. Together, Shulman and Rao discussed the invention of the poetic form of the *padam* during the 15th century in the famous temple-town of Tirupati. They argued that although proto-*padams* are found throughout India before this time, the poet Annamayya created something truly new, unique, and even modern with his actualization of the poetic form. Jack Hawley noted that the effects of Annamayya’s innovation— if Annamayya truly is the originator of the *pada* form— were felt within a century as far north as the Braj region. In saying so, he chose poems attributed to Surdas as his point of reference.

The second presentation of the afternoon was given by Ajay Rao (University of Toronto) on the topic of *Shrivaishnavas at Vijayanagara*. Rao discussed the rise of Rama-worship at Vijayanagar, and the possibility of the transference of ritual and texts from the sixteenth-century Mahanavami celebration in Sri Vaishnava-controlled Vijayangara to 18th century Varanasi. He argued that the existence of the rituals and texts with the success and influence of the Vijayanagara kingdom may have contributed to the later popularity of these practices elsewhere. Rao’s presentation generated discussion about the cosmopolitanism of courts in early modern India, and the importance of marking or not marking newness, connection, and lineage.

Sumit Guha (Rutgers University), talking about *Northerners in the Bharuds of Ekanatha*, further highlighted a certain cosmopolitanism of the 16th century manifest in poems written in the voices of travelers through the towns and countryside of early modern Maharashtra. The speakers of the poems—fakirs, dervishes, jogis, snake charmers, religious wanderers, East Africans—all used vocabulary reflecting their own region and orientation in the world. Thus, Arabic, Persian, Dakkhani, Punjabi, and South Indian words and sounds are blended into the Eknath corpus; at times Eknath employs a “bhakti vocabulary,” while in cases where he speaks in the voice of a Fakir, his “invocations to the Supreme are Islamicate.” Guha argued that because this wide vocabulary was employed in Eknath’s poems, villagers must have been conversant with a wide range of linguistic variation and signification, leading him to posit the notion of a “village cosmopolitanism” in the early modern period. These poems circulated both orally and in written form, meaning that they enjoyed widespread popularity and were comprehensible to a large population. The implications for thinking about circulation, then, are two-fold. On one hand, the movement of a wide variety of people through the subcontinent resulted in the legibility of different cultural origins and languages to common villagers. On the other, it highlights the agency of travelers, merchants, and mendicants in the transmission of ideas, language, and culture at the “plebian not courtly level.”

Relating a different process of transmission through travel, Columbia’s own Gary Tubb discussed *Why Chaitanya Traveled South*. Tubb described the uniquely extensive documentation of Chaitanya’s life, which seems to have been intended expressly for the dissemination of his story and promotion of his movement. This is chiefly indicated by the fact that although his work was primarily conducted in Bengali, the documents written about him were mostly composed in Sanskrit. The documents describe four reasons for Chaitanya’s journey. The most relevant here is that he recruits people who hold power in each of the places he visits, and then sends those people to go and spread the movement in another part of the subcontinent. The documents that these educated and powerful men wrote about Chaitanya provide the basis for Tubb’s argument that Chaitanya’s tour of the South was for the “explicit purpose of circulation” of his ideas. Aditya Behl, reporting a whispered conversation with Milind Wakankar, noted that Sufi literature is similarly rich in documentation of travel and of charismatic influence over people in positions of political power. This also generated a discussion of what might have been the conceptualization of the subcontinent in the days before cartography, and how the cosmopolitanism of the courts at this time is at odds with the rather small sphere of influence the courts actually possessed.

Concluding the day’s discussion, Allison Busch returned to the

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This year the Southern Asian Institute had the pleasure of hosting a number of social events for students, faculty and friends. In September SAI held the first Chai & Chat event of the academic year. And after a number of requests to do so, a second Chai & Chat was held in February. SAI also sponsored an end of semester Student Social which drew over 150 students from the different schools of Columbia University. All three events gave SAI affiliates the opportunity to meet others in their field, talk with their professors over samosas, and listen to the latest Bollywood songs.

In addition, SAI introduced a Friday Film Series in the Spring semester. The film series materialized in coordination and support from Professor Ananya Vajpeyi who suggested a theme that coincided with her course, “Violence and Conflict in Modern South Asia.” The film series opened with “1947/Earth” to an audience of over 45 people and closed with “Mr. and Mrs. Iyer.” The Friday afternoon films were another wonderful opportunity for students and faculty to unwind from their studies and enjoy exceptional films, covering a myriad of subjects on South Asia. The Southern Asian Institute is eager to continue both the film series and its social events in the upcoming academic year.
Gail Omvedt Speaks on Bhakti Movements

By Joel Lee

On April 18, Gail Omvedt delivered a Brown Bag lecture jointly sponsored by the Southern Asian Institute and the Department of Religion at Barnard College, titled “Bhakti Movements and Dalit Protests.” Columbia’s Professor John Stratton Hawley introduced Omvedt, social activist and author of a number of scholarly articles and books, including Dalits and the Democratic Revolution (1994) and the recent (2004) Penguin biography of Ambedkar.

Omvedt began her talk by explaining how she became involved in the study of bhakti movements. In her studies in the Marathi language, she found the bhakti poet Tukaram, who composed in some of the “most difficult and best Marathi,” to be both hugely popular and insufficiently translated. With her social activist husband, Omvedt undertook translations of Tukaram into English, which led her to an interest in the poet’s time period and milieu. In the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries bhakti poetry and practices flourished in northern and western India. Omvedt identified this as the “early modern,” rather than “medieval,” period. She pointed out parallels between social and intellectual developments in India and other parts of the world during this time. For instance, pre-dating the Englishman Sir Thomas More’s celebrated Utopia (1516) was the bhakti poet Ravidas’s poem Begumpura, which also sketches a utopian vision of society.

“Why is bhakti worth studying?” Omvedt asked. First, she suggested, it’s simply good poetry. Second, it offers practically the only textual source for the voice of the masses during that historical period.

Turning to the pilgrimage center of Pandarpur, which has long played a central role in the circulation of Maharashtrian bhakti poetry and practices, Omvedt made the provocative assertion that its deity Vitthala is in fact not a god, but a goddess. She argued that the bhakti poets address Vitthala both as male and female, and pointed out that the conversion of goddess shrines into temples of Brahmanical male gods through many centuries of South Asian history is a well-established pattern. Passing around a photograph of the icon of Vitthala at Pandarpur, Omvedt encouraged audience members to consider for themselves whether the image appeared male or female.

Next Omvedt outlined her notion of the politics of bhakti in the early modern period. The “low” class, “low” caste social position of many of the radical bhakti poet-saints was the first crucial point. Their popularity was not well received by the orthodox; legend has it, for instance, that Brahmins murdered Tukaram and threw the manuscript of his poetry into a river, so outraged were they that a Shudra (“low caste”) would presume to write at all. Omvedt suggested that the bhakti poets were “pop idols” of their day, and their public performances of poetry and song were the equivalent of “rock concerts.” Muslim kings, in their relative indifference to maintaining Brahmanical social and political order, played a “facilitating role” in the efflorescence of bhakti. Interestingly, though, Islam did not attempt institutionally to co-opt the popularity of Kabir, whereas Brahmanism did try to co-opt the non-Brahmin bhakti saints.

Omvedt characterized the eighteenth century as a “period of reaction” by Brahmins to the popularity of the bhakti poets. A “process of cooptation,” she noted, is traceable in the Brahmanical hagiographies of the period. In these hagiographies, the radical bhakti saints are depicted as “ineffectual household-ers,” they are subordinated to Brahmin gurus, their identities as Dalits or Muslims are denied or rejected, their wives are maligned, and caste is generally affirmed. That these elements of the hagiographies are fabricated is suggested by the poetry of the radical saints. Omvedt cited again Ravidas’s utopian, anticyclic Begumpura, and called one of Tukaram’s poems, which uses the term adhikaar (“right”), the “First Charter of Human Rights.” As a whole, Omvedt’s model of historical process—from rebellion to cooption to reassertion—follows the outline proposed by Dr. Bhimrao R. Ambedkar in the treatise he was working on at the time of his death, titled “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India” (see volume 3 of Ambedkar’s complete works).

In the ensuing question and answer session, Professor Frances Pritchett asked about Ambedkar’s position on the bhakti saints. Omvedt replied that while Ambedkar was drawn to Tukaram and others, he also at times distanced himself from them. Further discussion revolved around the relationship of bhakti and tantra traditions to early modern bhakti, and the dialectical character of the larger historical process of conflict and cooptation exemplified by bhakti and even Buddhism in India. Ultimately Omvedt concluded the afternoon with a fiery verse of Kabir.
Corinne Lefevre-Agrati, Ahmanson-Getty Fellow at the Center for 17th and 18th Century Studies at UCLA, delivered the lecture entitled “Recovering a Missing Voice from Mughal India: the Imperial Discourse of Jahangir (1605-1627)” on Monday, March 26, 2007. The lecture was co-sponsored by the Southern Asian Institute and the Department of Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Culture.

She spoke of the need to revise the historiography on Jahangir. The current scholarship focuses more on the Emperor’s alcoholism and opium addiction and less on his statecraft. Jahangir is subsumed into the shadow of his family and dynastic members. There is a need, in her own words, to “free Jahangir of the yokes of both Akbar and Nur Jahan.” Based on a careful reading of the Jahangir Nama, she speculated on the Emperor’s political, intellectual and aesthetic life.

A substantial component of the lecture treated Jahangir’s ideas of statecraft and governance. Lefevre-Agrati noted that Jahangir’s political ideologies appear to be only superficially inscribed within an Islamic and Sufi framework. They were drawn for the most part from more secular traditions. While works of akhlaq are not directly mentioned in the memoirs, she posited that the influence of this genre appears salient. The edifying maxims and anecdotes that lavishly punctuate Jahangir’s memoirs are evidence of intertextuality between his text and those of other medieval authors of advice literature. Akhlaq literature was also a part of the curricula for Mughal Princes.

In addition to akhlaq, Jahangir refers to the Tura-i Chingizi (a text of political theory allegedly compiled during Chingiz Khan’s time) although he appears more conscious of a Timurid heritage than a Chingizi. The latter’s influence, as Lefevre-Agrati pointed out, was perhaps no more than “a legitimizing relic called for in times of political uncertainty.”

In terms of Jahangir’s relationship with Mughal intellectual traditions of governance, Lefevre-Agrati observed that Jahangir acknowledges influences of only his father, Emperor Akbar, although he mentions Emperors Babur and Humayun in other contexts. He invokes Akbar’s statecraft in relation to his own religious policy, administrative practice and military expansionism. Yet, one has to ask to what extent such invocations were borne of remorse Jahangir is believed to have felt after his earlier rebellious ways against Akbar. Lefevre-Agrati also discussed Jahangir’s ruminations on justice and charity. The Emperor speaks of minimizing tax pressures and sustaining charitable imperial institutions such as royal weighings and shrine visits.

Lefevre-Agrati then went on to describe Jahangir’s penchant for geographical, ethnological, zoological and botanical investigations. This, she noted, was a trait Jahangir shared with early modern European rulers such as Habsburg emperor Rudolf II. She argued that at the root of his curiosity about the natural world was an aesthetic appreciation for the aj’alib or “the marvels of creation,” a popular motif in medieval Islamic intellectual history.

An interesting corollary to these naturalist and aesthetic impulses was Jahangir’s predisposition towards measurement, enumeration and classification. Thus, Lefevre-Agrati posited, the Emperor “physically and symbolically took possession of its territories and inhabitants and reasserted his sovereignty over them.” Jahangir also commissioned artists to selectively illustrate his memoirs, self-consciously breaking from earlier Mughal memoir-writing traditions. This and other aestheticizing impulses, Lefevre-Agrati argued, “should be seen as a masterpiece of Late Renaissance imperial propaganda, and certainly not as the work of some inebriated puppet.”
only possible with left parties, giving the left a historic chance to have the government do its bidding. Otherwise, Ahmad questioned how much communal strife was the reason for Congress winning votes, and cited a narrowing of differences between the BJP and Congress, whereby the BJP had become well-versed in market-driven economies and supported private investors. In many ways, he said, the BJP had hijacked the Congress agenda, while Congress had allowed the BJP to become a Hindu party. Ahmad tried to account for the rise of the RSS in Indian realpolitik in the 1980s and 90s by pointing out that Congress, for its part, had lost its programmatic profile and command of a national political space after The Emergency, when patronage and clientele systems became much more prominent, ceding space for the RSS to move in.

Ahmad also pointed to a broader trend of regionalization he sees in Indian elections. He commented that the “very strong national bourgeoisie” are in fact “supported by regionally rooted bourgeoisies, encompassing a range of propertied classes.” Voting is about local issues and regional concerns that become articulated in national party platforms. Yet, during the Q&A, when Partha Chatterjee asked what the significance of large policy debates was at all, if local and regional balances will decide everything in the end, Ahmad replied that the national power center does still matter. For instance, when the BJP is in power, he said, “they appoint RSS people to everything,” so there are long-term effects to these national appointments.

Drawing attention to the new relationships he sees between domestic and foreign policy, Ahmad argued, among other things, that 9/11 has given the Indian government a new language in which to speak of Indian realities. For instance the Bombay blasts were not seen in relation to the Shiv Sena, but instead, as free-standing Islamic terror/fascism, as the national security advisor of India adopted U.S. rhetoric. It is not only a matter of policy, Ahmad concluded, but indicative of a new language and way of perceiving Indians.
theme of circulation, and enumerated still more ways through which it occurred. Itinerant people such as religious mendicants, proselytizers, military persons, diplomats, merchants, and artists from various social classes all contributed to the movement and exchange of literature, language, philosophy, material culture, and countless other facets of both courtly and common life. She suggested that future work on circulation would also want to incorporate discussions of roads and trade routes in particular periods; one would want to take into account the role of magnet centers like Banaras or Brindavan in attracting particular social groups; also, what are some larger circulatory patterns of populations that contribute to how we understand the trajectories of various forms of culture? Thinking of people and culture as dynamic, moving south to north and back again, many interesting relationships may be found to constitute a richer and more varied network of transmission and exchange that promises greatly to enrich our understanding of the dynamic interconnectedness of the subcontinent in the early modern period.

“All The God’s Women,” a Distinguished Lecture Series
With V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman

By Jon Keune

The first SAI Distinguished Lecture of 2007 was given on January 29th by two eminent scholars of South Indian languages and literatures: V. Narayana Rao and David Shulman. Dr. Rao is Krishnadevaraya Professor of the Languages and Cultures of Asia at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a leading scholar and translator of Telugu literature. David Shulman, a specialist in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit literature is Professor of Indian Studies and Comparative Religion at Hebrew University, currently visiting at the University of Chicago in the department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. In addition to their respective lists of publications, they have collaborated on many works including Demon’s Daughter: a Love Story from South India (2006), Classical Telugu Poetry (2002) and Lover’s Guide to Warangal (2002).

Their lecture, “All the God’s Women: Venkateswara’s love life at Tirupati in the songs of Annamayya,” highlighted some of the intellectual and aesthetic fruits of their recently published book God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupati (2005). As they alternated between reading the poetry and commenting on it, they emphasized the poetic and conceptual novelty of the 15th century poet’s work. A temple poet at Tirupati, Annamayya composed using a short, accessible Telugu form (padam) that broke away from the more sanskritized court poetry in Telugu at the time. Shulman argued that something transitional seems to have happened in the political scene of 15th century Andhra, such that Tirupati and its main deity quickly gained popularity and patronage. The economic themes present in many of the stories from the time about the deity seem to indicate the prominence of the merchant class and the growth of financial networks, Shulman proposed. He described the inscription over 12,000 of Annamayya’s poems on copper plates as perhaps the most expensive publishing venture in the history of the subcontinent. At the same time, however, Rao pointed out that Telugu literature after Annamayya seems to have neglected him, and in the 19th century his poetry became all but taboo due to its often clearly erotic content (e.g., Annamayya’s signature line in his poems always refers somehow to lovemaking).

Although Annamayya’s ancestors strove to preserve and classify these unconventional works and publicize stories about the poet, the impact of Annamayya on subsequent literature seems to have been rather minor. Thus the contribution of Rao’s and Shulman’s translations and research are all the greater, uncovering a neglected yet surprising poetic voice from the 15th century. Following the lecture Rao and Shulman’s lively discussions about the legacy and circulation of Annamayya’s work, the padam form that he used and its relation to northern and southern forms of the same name, the poet’s use of male and female voice, the surprising degree of resolution in his poetry in contrast to earlier Tamil bhakti poets, and the history and technology of copper plate inscription. The event concluded with Professor Rao reading one more poem, thereby allowing Annamayya the final word.
SAI Faculty Updates


**Akeel Bilgrami** was invited by President Lee C. Bollinger and Provost Alan Brinkley to deliver the Fall 2006 University Lecture on October 25th titled “Gandhi, Newton, and the Enlightenment.” He also co-taught the Committee on Global Thought course “Secularism and Diversity in Global Thought” in Fall 2006 with Partha Chatterjee and Nicholas Dirks. His forthcoming book is titled, “Affect, Memory, and Materiality: An Essay on Archival Mediation,” in 2006. Her recent essays include: “Ambedkar and the Politics of Minority: A Reading,” in *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition*, eds. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Mazumdar and Andrews Sartori, Oxford University Press, 2007; and “Who is the Dalit? The Emergence of a New Political Subject” in a Festschrift for Professor Eleanor Zelliot, edited by Anne Feldhuas and Manu Bhagvan (Oxford University Press: 2007).


“A Thousand Genocides Now,” a Distinguished Lecture with Kamala Visweswaran

By Dean Ascardi and Batool Hassan

On Monday, September 25, 2006 SAI held its first Distinguished Lecture Series event titled “A Thousand Genocides Now: Gujarat in the modern imaginary of violence,” with honored guest speaker Kamala Visweswaran, Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Partha Chatterjee introduced Professor Visweswaran who has previously contributed a volume to the Subaltern Studies series on women in the Civil Disobedience Movement and published *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* in 1994. Her most recent academic work is on violence and specifically communal violence in India today and the lecture came from a section of her upcoming book.

The speaker began by narrating her arrival in Gujarat a year after the riots and her surprise at how the damage to the city was mostly hidden. Most people recognize that that year was markedly different, but are not able to describe the violence as genocide even though they know it fits the legal definition. The speaker further went on to say that the definition of genocide, being so closely linked with the Holocaust, is difficult to apply elsewhere. The Hindu Right peculiarly claims itself as both victim and perpetrator of genocide, simultaneously praising Hitler and inventing a Muslim holocaust against themselves.

Dr. Visweswaran then addressed the academic and legal treatment of the term genocide, noting how sexual violence against women is accepted as common in times of mass violence. She chose to write the narrative from the point of view of her own nightmare instead of reproducing stories of the sexual violence women have lived through. She narrates the nightmare, expressing the complexities and intensity of such an experience. She speaks about reports of a mysterious night rapist who is later identified as a ghost, a manifestation of the unresolved trauma experienced by women in the riots. Vocalizing fear against this rapist also functions to bring men home early to defend the women, so women know where the men of their family are: home and safe.

In the end there are only stories. From repeatedly being asked about their experiences from reporters and NGO workers, stories from children have become routinized and homogenized, the emotional impact becoming confused. Being brought out by hand with a father negotiating with the mob or being left behind in the house when a father fled, drawing away the crowd, the actions of parents are at times hard to justify or understand.

Dr. Visweswaran finally reflected on her own experience during her time in Gujarat. Why did particular people tell her their stories? It is not simply in order to record another testimony, but in order to have her carry part of the pain herself. The violence is now around us and in us. During the discussion, an audience member questioned political violence and how it has been ethnicized and racialized. If political violence is thus ethnicized and racialized, does all political violence become genocide, and then how useful is the term “genocide” analytically? Dr. Visweswaran replied that claiming genocide is a legal strategy and that lawyers within India try to hold the state accountable for signing the genocide convention and prosecute crimes against humanity within the Indian legal system. However, more often claiming genocide is a strategy when the state has failed and communities have no other form of legal redress. Claiming genocide in practice may hold more weight instrumentally than analytically in seeking justice. The fact that states are racially aligned is a truism that does not (Continued on page 18)
(Continued from page 16 Faculty Updates)

g got us far; it does not tell us much of their local ideologies or their strategies used to engage people effectively. She further noted that what is sad is that the Sangh Parivar has been organizing in Gujarat for so long now that much of the political science has failed to analyze the ideological structures or the appeals that are made. The genocide was state sponsored, but it was also popular as a result of the dissemination of propaganda for so long.

Another person asked about feminism in the context of genocide and about violence against women. Dr. Visweswaran problematized the use of survivor testimony and their reproduction in human rights reports and questioned whether telling such stories is enabling or harmful. She was troubled by how these women must face the humiliation of the public display of their stories through documentaries when local conceptions and values of shame are in place. This is why she used her nightmare narrative in her upcoming book instead of testimony.

By Zainab Mahmood

SAI has continued to offer fifteen week, thirty hour in-service courses this academic year, hosted in cooperation with the New York After School Professional Development program. All teacher participants are eligible for “P” professional credits which work to supplement their Masters in Education, helping to create the opportunity for career advancement. Religions of South Asia was held in the Fall 2006 semester, followed by Islam in South Asia and the Middle East in Spring 2007 (co-sponsored by Columbia University’s Middle East Institute.) Both classes were created and led by Assistant Director and Outreach Coordinator Zainab Mahmood, and guest instructors included a number of university faculty as well as curriculum and pedagogy experts from Teachers College. Guest lecturers included Jack Hawley, Allison Busch, Vidya Dehejia, William Gaudelli, Richard Bulliet, and Taoufiq Ben Amor, to name a few.

Topics for the Religions of South Asia course included Understanding Buddhism through its Art and Architecture; Hindu Literature and Epic; The Jain Tradition, and more. Topics for the Islam in South Asia and the Middle East course included: Muhammad and the Birth of Islam; Re-inventing Tradition: Non-Formal Islamic Education in the 21st Century; Modernism in the Middle East and South Asia; and Music of the Muslim World.

Many thanks are due to the dynamic teacher-participants who made each session lively and enriching with their engaging questions, candid comments and genuine enthusiasm. Moreover, thanks and appreciation are due to the Columbia faculty who took the time to help educate the teachers of the New York City school system. Further gratitude is due also to the Middle East Institute for the professional and financial support provided this past semester.

SAI will continue to offer in-service courses in the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 semesters. To find out more, visit the outreach page on the SAI website for updates: [http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/sai/outreach.html](http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/sai/outreach.html). To learn more about the New York After School Professional Development Program, please visit their website at [www.nyasdpd.org](http://www.nyasdpd.org).
The Southern Asian Institute coordinates the many activities at Columbia University that relate to South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives.) SAI's conferences, seminars, exhibits, films, and lecture series bring together Columbia's tremendous South Asianist faculty and students from widely varying interests and backgrounds. The Institute also has lively ties with the United Nations, the diplomatic community, international agencies, and New York City's South Asian diaspora community (the largest in North America.) In addition, the Institute's outreach activities provide a broad range of resources for K-12 teachers interested in South Asia.

Southern Asian Institute

SAI would also like to express a special thanks to its work study students this academic year. We are immensely grateful for the help and time commitment of Julie Payne, Shruti Patel, Gaurav Gujral, and Sonal Shah, who enlivened our office and assisted in all tasks, big and small. Thanks!