Teaching Presentation

Tamil Bhakti Ethics or When it is Acceptable to Kill My Child

Professor Srilata Raman
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Abstract
This teaching presentation will be an interactive one. In it, I begin by sketching some of the salient features of Tamil Bhakti Religiosity as it emerged from the 6th century of the Common Era and then focusing specifically on medieval hagiographical literature. Speaking about this literature, the scholar Dennis Hudson (1989:375) posed the following troubling questions we too shall bear in mind. "How, for example, is it saintly to give your wife away to an ascetic who asks for her and then to chop up your relatives and hers when they try to stop him from taking her out of town? How is it saintly to chop the heads off everyone in your family, including servants and a nursing child, because during a famine they ate the food you had set apart for Śiva’s temples? How is it saintly to kill your only son because a sādhu asks you to and then to cook him and sit down to eat him?" We shall consider, together, some of the motifs relating to devotion and self-sacrifice in this literature and what it tells us – from our contemporary perspective – of the relationship between morality and ethics and how we might make sense, together, of pre-modern conceptions of how an exemplary devotional life should be lived and, further, if such conceptions are as anachronistic as we might initially be inclined to think.

About the Speaker
Professor Srilata Raman is Associate Professor of Modern Hinduism in the Department of Religion at the University of Toronto. Her academic interests include Tamil and Sanskrit intellectual formations in South India from precolonial times to modernity, Modern Hinduism, Colonial Sainthood and modern Tamil literature. She completed her B.A. in New Delhi, India, her M.Phil. at Oxford University, England, and Ph.D. at the University of Tübingen, Germany. The author of numerous articles, one monograph (“Self-Surrender to God in Srivaisnavism. Tamil Cats and Sanskrit Monkeys”, Routledge, 2007) and an edited volume (“Words and Deeds. Hindu and Buddhist Rituals in South Asia”, Harrasowitz, 2005). Her current, second monograph (forthcoming with Routledge in early 2014) is titled "The Transformation of Tamil Religion. Ramalinga Swamigal and Modern, Dravidian Sainthood".

Event Details
Tuesday, 3 September 2013
3.00pm to 4.30pm
South Asian Studies Meeting Room
AS7 #04-11
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National University of Singapore

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