

Printing Religion in South Asia

Co-convened by Megan Eaton Robb and Pranav Prakash

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Symposium Abstract:

Our symposium explores how printing technologies and printed objects transformed religious communities in South Asia. We approach “print” as an all-encompassing category of replication technologies—from xylography to movable type to digital modeling. Book objects are not only repositories of historical evidence but also sites that shaped public consciousness. Therefore, our project will focus on how practices and tools used in the production of book objects may be governed by or influence politics, ideologies, and cultures. In unraveling the nexus between the history of print and South Asian religions, this symposium seeks to address a variety of critical and intellectual concerns. First, it will interrogate the impact of material cultures associated with printing technologies on the religious views, practices and identities of South Asian peoples. Second, it will deliberate upon the critical idioms and analytical tools, which are effective in appraising the dynamic relationship between print cultures and religious communities in South Asia. Furthermore, we will examine how indigenous terms and ideas were excluded from critical vocabularies of the history of the book in modern times through neglect, erasure, or censorship. By historicizing book objects in colonial and capitalist contexts, our project seeks to expand the critical vocabularies used in the history of the book to be more incisive through being more inclusive. Finally, building on specific case studies about printing technologies, printmakers, and printed objects, the symposium will reflect upon the advantages and challenges of exploring South Asian religions from the vantage point of the history of print. We have invited primarily early-career scholars whose research papers promise to make critical interventions in the study of material cultures. This symposium is part of our long-term intellectual investment in an upcoming generation of scholars, with an eye to building a community around the history of the book in South Asia.

Panelists:

Anannya Bohidar	Ph.D. Student	University of Pennsylvania
Rushnae Kabir	Ph.D. Student	University of Pennsylvania
Alexandra Kaloyanides	Associate Professor	University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Sharmeen Mehri	Ph.D. Student	State University of New York at Buffalo
Shobna Nijhawan	Associate Professor	York University
Pranav Prakash	Junior Research Fellow	University of Oxford
Megan Eaton Robb	Associate Professor	University of Pennsylvania
Rick Weiss	Adjunct Professor	Victoria University of Wellington

Discussants:

John Cort	Professor Emeritus	Denison University
Jamal Jones	Assistant Professor	University of Wisconsin–Madison
Daniel Morgan	Assistant Professor	Santa Clara University
Yasmin Saikia	Professor	Arizona State University

Schedule of Presentation:

8:30–10:00 am	Panel 1	<i>The Impact of Print: Recovering Erasures, Documenting Cultures</i>
8:30–9:15 am	Pranav Prakash	<i>Unorthodox Printing: A Brief History of Maithili Chapbooks in Colonial South Asia</i>
9:15–10:00 am	Sharmeen Mehri	<i>New Ways of Reading: Printing the Khordeh Avesta in Colonial India</i>
Chair/Discussant	John Cort	
10:00–10:30 am	<i>Coffee/Tea</i>	
10:30–12:00 noon	Panel 2	<i>The Craft of Print: Continuities and Transformations</i>
10:30–11:15 pm	Anannya Bohidar	<i>Hindu Śāstra, Sexual Science or Pornography?: A Study of Printed Sex Books in the Tamil Public Sphere (1900-1940s)</i>
11:15–12:00 noon	Rick Weiss	<i>Early Tamil Hindu print culture: revolutionary or merely reproductive?</i>
Chair/Discussant	Jamal Jones	
12:00–2:00 pm	<i>Lunch</i>	
2:00–3:30 pm	Panel 3	<i>The Community of Print: Printed Materials as Religious Artefacts</i>
2:00–2:45 pm	Shobna Nijhawan	<i>At the margins of the Hindi periodical: Marketing Religious publications</i>
2:45–3:30 pm	Rushnae Kabir	<i>Witnessing Love in the Milād Ritual: Devotion, Orality, and Emotion in the Milādnāma</i>
Chair/Discussant	Yasmin Saikia	
3:30–4:00 pm	<i>Coffee/Tea</i>	
4:00–5:30 pm	Panel 4	<i>The Power of Print: Crafting Narratives of Identity</i>
4:00–4:45 pm	Alexandra Kaloyanides	<i>The Power of the Book in Nineteenth-Century Burma</i>
4:45–5:30 pm	Megan Eaton Robb	<i>The Imperial Constellation of Newspapers</i>
Chair/Discussant	Daniel Morgan	

Abstracts of Individual Presentations

Presenter: Anannya Bohidar

Title of the Paper: *Hindu Śāstra, Sexual Science or Pornography?: A Study of Printed Sex Books in the Tamil Public Sphere (1900-1940s)*

Abstract:

My paper studies early twentieth-century printed Tamil sexual texts, a genre popularly known as *kokkōkam* in South India. The term *kokkōkam* as a genre emerged after the name of a sixteenth-century Tamil sexual text, *Kokkōkam* or *Ativīrārāmapāṇṭiya Kokkōkam*, attributed to the Pandian king, Ativīrārāma Pāṇṭiyaṅ (r. 1564–1604 C.E.). This work was a rendition of the Sanskrit sexual text *Ratirahasyam* popularly known as the *Koka Śāstra* (c. 700-1200 C.E.), written by a medieval poet Kokkoka. By the turn of the century, *Kokkōkam* garnered so much attention that it became the *ur-text* for later printed works on sex, sexual science, and didactic and pornographic literature. Eventually, the term *kokkōkam* became an umbrella term for printed sexual texts in Tamil. These popular sexual texts were often partial and condensed translations, commentaries, annotated, and cited versions of

European sexual science and traditional knowledge. And this role was carried by the publisher or bookseller or the indistinct category of the editor that emerged with the introduction of modern print. I trace how, using vernacular language and print technology, the publishers of these 'remixed' *kokkōkam-s* certified their works by introducing prefaces (*mukavurai*) and introductory remarks (*pīdikai*) in the books. The publishers used these sections to establish the historical context and views on contemporary socio-sexual and religious reforms. By focusing on these sections introduced by the publishers in the 'remixed' *kokkōkam-s*, I investigate how print technology helped in negotiating the 'Hindu' origins of the *ur*-text within the 'modern-western-scientific' genre of sexual science, vernacular eugenics, and pornography.

Presenter: Rushnae Kabir

Title of the Paper: *Witnessing Love in the Milād Ritual: Devotion, Orality, and Emotion in the Milādnāma*

Abstract:

The intersection of print, orality, and performance is closely witnessed in the popular Islamic ritual of Milād. As a celebration of the Prophet Muḥammad's birth, the ritual involves the recitation of devotional poetry and prose narratives in his praise. Chapbooks carrying such poems and narratives (*milādnāmah*) have been published from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and have come to occupy an important place in the observance of the ritual. They act as both an aid and a means for its reproduction. Yet, the true meaning of the words they carry is only activated through a public, performative context. Therefore, a study of these chapbooks must be situated in, and incorporate a study of, the Milād's ritual performance.

My paper argues that embodied knowledge and socialization are crucial determinants of how ritual book objects are consumed. It begins by providing a brief survey of various *milādnāmah* from the late-eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries, while paying particular attention to their material features. It then provides a closer reading of two *milādnāmahs* from the early twentieth century, *Milād nāmah aur Rasūl Bīti* (Khawāja Ḥasan Niẓāmī, Delhi: Jāmi'ah Hamdard, 1918) and an early edition of the extremely popular *Aslī Milād-i Akbar* (Muḥammad Akbar Wārṣī, Delhi: Nāz Publishing House, 1918).

These two texts, published in the same year, went on to gain very different levels of popularity and circulation. They also emerged from different intellectual traditions. Placing these texts in conversation with each other, the paper explores the relationship of orality, memory and print. Within this context, it also goes on to explore the role of emotion in religious practice, arguing that emotion is both embedded in the text and activated in practice.

Presenter: Alexandra Kaloyanides

Title of the Paper: *The Power of the Book in Nineteenth-Century Burma*

Abstract:

This presentation explores powerful books from nineteenth-century Burma. With attention to the material qualities of Buddhist and Christian books, as well as of books that challenge those categories, I argue that books acted as inanimate guides for understanding immaterial powers as well as animate forces in the material world during this period of dramatic political change. In particular, I focus on books created by and circulated through the American Baptist mission to Burma during the Konbaung kingdom, the country's last Buddhist dynasty. These books include Christian tracts featuring newly formed scripts for minority communities as well as highly adorned Buddhist ritual manuals. I show how the prominent place the object of the book had in both Baptist and Buddhist communities led to conversion and resistance. Furthermore, I draw on new research into Burma's natural resources—especially rubies, lacquer, teak, and gold—to consider the way the land's extraordinary commodities shaped its powerful religious book cultures.

Presenter: Sharmeen Mehri

Title of the Paper: *New Ways of Reading: Printing the Khordeh Avesta in Colonial India*

Abstract:

This paper discusses the impact of Parsi publishing presses on the extensive religious texts of Zoroastrians. The translations of the *Khordeh Avesta* and the various Avestan texts into Gujarati had a reasonable impact upon the community in South Asia. Parsis entered the printing industry in the eighteenth century, bringing to prominence printing and publishing of newspaper presses as well. In particular, Behramjee Jeejeebhoy, a Zoroastrian priest, brought about the casting of the Gujarati type in 1796 at the Courier Press. He printed and published the *Khordeh Avesta* in 1798 from which various editions of the prayer book were read and owned by Zoroastrians around South Asia. The transmission of prayers from Avesta into Gujarati script morphed concepts as well as changed the understanding of various Avestan prayers, especially when comparing minor differences from one copy to another. In addition to working with the changes within the prayers, this paper examines the social use of the *Khordeh Avesta*, especially its impact upon the various communities of Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians that resided in cities of Mumbai and Karachi. The printing of this prayer book gave new life and circulation to the understanding of an ancient religion and language that changed the way Zoroastrians practice their religion to this day.

Presenter: Shobna Nijhawan

Title of the Paper: *At the margins of the Hindi periodical: Marketing Religious publications*

Abstract:

In this presentation, I turn to the literal margins of the Hindi periodical and look at advertisements placed by small and large publishers of Hindi religious texts and images in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Was marketing religious publications any different than marketing other types of books or goods and services? Did the advertisements of religious publications integrate into a certain Hindi literary and Hindu nationalist narrative of the time? Treating the extensive unpaginated pages of the Hindi socio-literary and political periodical *Sudha* (1927-1941s) with its numerous advertisements as an archive, I focus on one type of advertisements, i.e. religious books available on the print market at the time. Embedding this exploration in the question of the transformation of religious communities by print technologies, I suggest that religious books were promoted as educational and religious (sometimes also devotional) material artefacts as much as they were marketed as print commodities.

The purposes of advertising lay in enticing the readers of periodicals to purchase goods and services. For books, including religious works this meant that they had to be presented as suitable and own-worthy. Arguably, the advertisement section offers itself for a statement about ways print technologies “alter the religious views, practices and identities of South Asian peoples” (quoted from the call for papers). More than just widening readers’ horizons in a manner that was in line with the overall objective of many publishers and periodicals of the time, i.e. the creation of subject citizens of a nation-to-be, advertisements of religious publications seem to also have been embedded in a Hindu-nationalist narrative.

Presenter: Pranav Prakash

Title of the Paper: *Unorthodox Printing: A Brief History of Maithili Chapbooks in Colonial South Asia*

Abstract:

My research explores the rich archive of Maithili chapbooks that were printed between the 1850s and the 1950s. To elaborate upon my arguments regarding the shifting role of printing presses in shaping the religious worldview of Maithili communities, I have identified six chapbooks as case studies: namely, (i) *Sudāmā-carit* of Harinandan Dās (1840-?), (ii) *Mithilā Nāṭak* (1901) of Brj Bihārī Lāl Maṇḍal, (iii) *Nirdayī Sāsū* (1914) and (iv) *Punarvivāh* (1914-25) of Janārdan Jhā ‘Jansīdan’ (1872-1951), (v) *Sumatī* (1918) of Munshī

Rāsbihārī Lāl Dās (1872–1940), and (vi) *Vividha Bhajanāvalī* (1948) of Paṇḍit Rāmjī Chaudhurī (1878–1952). These chapbooks encompass a diversity of literary genres and styles: from *upanyāsa* (novella) to *nāṭaka* (play) to *bhajanāvalī* (songbook). They circulated among Maithili communities scattered over a vast region of South Asia—from the *Nīlācal* hills in Assam to the *Terāī* lowlands in Nepal to the *Arāvalī* range in Rajasthan. Most printing presses that published Maithili chapbooks during the colonial rule were short-lived, and new editions of chapbooks were rarely commissioned. Three out of six chapbooks included in this study were edited and published a second time. Based on an appraisal of their material features, textual concerns and reception history, I argue that Maithili chapbooks served as a new media where traditional and modernist voices competed for legitimacy and where critiques of caste and gender could be expressed in a way that was—more often than not—muted in manuscript and oral cultures. Furthermore, my research shows that although the production and circulation of Maithili chapbooks fluctuated throughout the last two centuries, the radically transformative potential of Maithili chapbooks, as a codicological genre, was quite firmly entrenched in Maithil communities.

Presenter: Megan Eaton Robb

Title of the Paper: *The Imperial Constellation of Newspapers*

Abstract:

In 1888, Matba' Akhtar Press in Lucknow published *Akhtar Shāhanshāhī*, or *Imperial Constellation*, which was a list and description of periodicals being published at that time in the United Provinces. The author of the list was Syed Muhammad Ashraf, the General Secretary of the Anjuman 'Imī and proprietor of *Akhhār Akhtar Hind*. While the cataloguing of the collection in Raza Rampur Library describes the collection as a *Savānih 'Umri Akhhārāt* or biography of newspapers, the formatting of the collection is more reminiscent of a *tazkirah*. The formatting of the account made the book appear much like a *tazkirah* for newspapers, despite the fact that many of the periodicals that were being described were not at all religious in nature. This presentation will think about the formatting of *tazkirahs* in the age of print, and consider how this format was potentially re-purposed to create an account of periodicals that in some ways was symmetrical to colonial digests of periodicals with their descriptions. I will compare and contrast the formatting and tone of accounts of *Akhtar Shāhanshāhī* with the Vernacular Newspaper Reports of that year; with six other *tazkirahs* published in the 1880s; and with six other *Savānih 'Umri*'s or biographies of the 1880s. I will also evaluate the language, formatting, decoration, and structure in comparison with six printed *tazkirah* volumes also published in the 1880s in Lucknow. Finally, I will evaluate whether volumes like *Akhtar Shāhanshāhī* can be considered as establishing journalism as a *farz* or duty for Urdu speakers in the South Asian subcontinent, and the extent to which this duty was inflected with religious import.

Presenter: Rick Weiss

Title of the Paper: *Early Tamil Hindu print culture: revolutionary or merely reproductive?*

Abstract:

This paper examines aspects of the shift from manuscript to print in South Asia in the first half of the nineteenth century. In particular, I ask: What new elements did printed religious books offer readers that manuscripts did not? My source material will be Tamil sectarian Hindu printed books from the 1830s to the 1850s. I will focus on elements that editors introduced in these printed editions, such as prose introductions, commentaries, and indexes, in order to test the adage, succinctly rephrased by Stuart Blackburn, that “print did not produce new books, only more old books” (Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, 1). Indeed, most early Hindu books in Tamil, and in other vernacular languages as well, were publications of texts previously circulating in manuscript form. This fact has led some scholars to argue that the early proliferation of print in South Asia was a technological revolution, one that did not, however, significantly transform literary or religious cultures. I will test this argument through a close examination of the formats and forms of early Tamil sectarian printed books.