

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON

ACADEMIC STUDY OF RELIGION

Jointly organized by
The India Centre, FLAME University, India
and Wellesley College, USA



AUG 7-8, 2025



FLAME UNIVERSITY

India is home to a rich mosaic of religious traditions as a birthplace of some of the world's oldest religions, such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, and with a significant presence of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, and the Bahá'í faith. Historically, it has welcomed diverse faith communities, with some seeking refuge. Despite this enduringly diverse religious heritage, there is a conspicuous absence of a robust academic framework for studying religion in India. This gap contrasts with countries like the United States, where institutions such as the American Academy of Religion (AAR) have encouraged a vibrant scholarly community dedicated to studying religion as a sociocultural, historical, and political phenomenon. Given India's long history as home to diverse faiths, there is an urgent need to develop a similar tradition of rigorous scholarly study of religion in India. It can promote cross-cultural dialogue, a deeper understanding of faiths beyond theological confines, and critical engagement with religion in public life. This international symposium aims to initiate a sustained conversation about the academic study of religion in India. It draws on global interdisciplinary perspectives while addressing contemporary local concerns.

PROGRAM SCHEDULE

DAY 1

AUGUST 7 - MORNING

9.30 - 10.00



Inauguration and Opening Remarks

Dishan Kamdar

Vice Chancellor, FLAME University

KEYNOTE SPEECH



The Case for Introducing the Academic Study of Religion in India

Arvind Sharma

McGill University

Prof. Sharma's keynote speech will highlight the significance of introducing the academic study of religion in India, emphasizing its multidimensional, poly-methodical, and multilingual aspects. Explaining the distinction between studying a religion and studying about religion, he will demonstrate that the latter can alleviate fears of those who consider studying religion threatening to the secular fabric of India and help augment its enduring cultural diversity.

10.00 - 10.30

Coffee Break

10.30 - 12.30



Panel 1: Anthropological Approaches to Religion

Chair: Pankaj Jain
FLAME University

10.30 - 11.00



Religion and Social Transformation in a Globalized World

Neelima Shukla-Bhatt
Wellesley College

This presentation will discuss the impact of globalization, technology, and the market economy on Indian religions, drawing on insights of major sociologists like Peter Berger. It will examine three recent developments and discuss them on social media and underscore that, since religion remains one of the most significant aspects of life for a majority in India, as elsewhere, it offers a rich locus for studying the impact of global currents on society.

11.00 - 11.30



Shaligrams in a Dark Digital River: Decolonizing Ritual Practice Through the Online Exchange of Sacred Stones

Holly Walters
Wellesley College

Shaligram (a sacred fossil ammonite) worship is a long-standing tradition of Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal that faced the danger of extinction due to climate change. This paper addresses the movement of Shaligram communities and ritual exchanges on the internet, where practitioners both uphold concerns about the legitimacy of Shaligram veneration online and push back against the rise of AI programs like GitaGPT. This potential Shaligram religious revival online poses a fascinating contemporary case study for the complexities of studying South Asian religion and ritual performance using material sacred objects within virtual spaces.

11.30 - 12.00



‘There is no Caste in Islam’: Social Hierarchy among Muslims in India

P.C. Saidalavi
Shiv Nadar University

This presentation problematizes the application of caste as a derivative discourse in the study of all Indian communities, including Muslims. It proposes that hierarchy within Muslim communities should be examined giving consideration to their self-understandings. Focusing on understandings of endogamy as an aspect of hierarchy among Muslims, it demonstrates that they view it in terms of Islamic jurisprudence. It argues that a more ethnographically committed approach reveals how Muslims make endogamy and hierarchy relevant and meaningful in their lives, drawing upon a range of categories and values, including those from Islam.

12.00 - 12.30

Q&A

12.30 - 14.00

Lunch

AUGUST 7 - AFTERNOON

14.00 - 16.30



Panel 2: Psychological and Philosophical Perspectives on Religion

Chair: Neelima Shukla-Bhatt
Wellesley College

14.00 - 14.30



Freudian Psychoanalysis and Indian Psychology

Pankaj Jain
FLAME University

This presentation argues that the Freudian psychoanalytic framework, while influential, proves insufficient when applied exclusively to Indian cultural contexts. Drawing on multiple illustrative scenarios, it demonstrates that foundational Freudian concepts, such as the Oedipus Complex, require significant revision for application in non-Western settings. Rather than discarding psychoanalysis altogether, it advocates for an ethnopsychological approach that adapts its tools to Indian contexts for culturally attuned and theoretically robust analyses.

14.30 - 15.00



Bhakti Beyond Religion: Fostering Hope Through Translation and Performance

Nitya Pawar
Ashoka University

This presentation examines the translation and performance of bhakti songs as a source of hope and community resilience. Based on conversations with Chandrakant Redican, a scientist whose translations of bhakti poetry gained popularity on social media through his anti-caste yet religious stand, and Shruthi Vishwanath, a feminist performer of devotional songs, who is often found on the road singing them for the empowerment of women and lower castes, it discusses how these creative practices foster shared understanding and support.

15.00 - 15.30



R. D. Ranade's Mystical Conception of Avatārahood

Pranav Ambardekar
FLAME University

This presentation examines an underexplored mystical conception of avatār as found in the work of R. D. Ranade (1886-1957): an Indian mystic, scholar, and philosopher. It clarifies, historically situates, and provides a rationale for Ranade's view. It distinguishes Ranade's conception of avatārahood from its popular understanding as a divine descent and its exposition by other Indian philosophers. It highlights significance of Ranade's conception in importing the messages of the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavadgītā and its contemporary relevance in relation to the philosophy of religion.

15.30 - 16.00



The Semiotics of the Nityāṣoḍaśīkārṇava Tantra: A Performative Text or a Document of Cultural Memory?

Madhu Khanna

Tantra Foundation, New Delhi

This presentation centres on a seminal text, the Sanskrit text Nityāṣoḍaśīkārṇava (NṢA), ("The Ocean of the Sixteen Eternal Nityas.") The NṢA is an anonymous sacred mystical text of the Śrīvidyā tradition. A well-known compendium of Sākta Tantra (ca 10th century), the NṢA is primarily concerned with illuminating the doctrine, esoteric practices, and coded meanings of the mystical worship of the goddess Tripurasundari for self-realization. Engaging the recent semiotic turn in translation studies, the presentation will employ a non-Western indigenous lineage-based approach for unpacking the secret meaning and symbols of the text and will raise the critical question: Is the NṢA a performative text or a document of cultural memory?

16.00 - 16.30

Q&A

16.30 - 17.00

Coffee Break

DAY 2

AUGUST 8 - MORNING

9.30 - 10.00

Coffee Break

10.00 - 12.00



Panel 3: Philological and Textual Studies

Chair: Pranav Ambardekar

FLAME University

10.00 - 10.30



Religious Studies and Interdisciplinarity: A Case Study in Islamic Cultural Studies

Louise Marlow
Wellesley College

This talk focuses on the inherent and necessary interdisciplinarity of Religious Studies as an academic field. It argues that, just as Religious Studies draws on the theories and methods of numerous scholarly disciplines – from art to anthropology, philology to psychology – these disciplines also benefit from the interpretations and insights generated in Religious Studies. Using an example from ongoing research about translations produced in Iraq and Iran during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the scholar will demonstrate the importance of a religious studies dimension, even in a topic not primarily concerned with religion.

10.30 - 11.00



The Devotee's Dilemma: Surrender and Agency in Bhakti

R. Krishnaswamy, *Jindal Global University*
Tarinee Awasthi, *FLAME University*

This presentation will first throw light on the inherent tension in one of the three paths of spiritual progress in Hinduism - bhakti or devotion, which can be described as an affective relationship between the devotee and the object of worship, with the devotee being normally subordinate. The tension arising from subordination is that on the one hand, it implies an unfilled gap between the divine and the devotee, no matter what she does; and on the other hand, since the foundational source of everything is considered divine, the devotee has no agency. It will then demonstrate how Sri Vaishnava theologian Yamuna's work *Stotraratna* engages with this dilemma and resolves it.

11.00 - 11.30



Purification to Preservation of Values: Tirtha Narratives as Dhārmic Ecology and Transformative Ethics in the Mahābhārata

Geetesh Nirban
Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi

This talk examines the concept of *tīrtha-yātrā* in the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata*, which presents pilgrimage as a practice that encompasses both self-purification (*śuddhikaraṇa*) and an ecological principle linked to dhārmic responsibilities. It highlights how the sacred landscapes depicted in the epic facilitate the attainment of salvation while enriching the discourse on environmental theology. The epic emphasises the intrinsic connection between spiritual growth and ecological responsibility, regarded as an essential *svadharma* within classical Indian philosophy. The talk examines how the epic constructs a transformative ethical framework through pilgrimage, signifying the obligation to preserve holistic well-being as a value and fostering a deep connection between the individual and the greater self.

11.30 - 12.00

Q&A

12.00 - 13.30

Lunch

AUGUST 8 - AFTERNOON

13.30 - 15.30



Panel 4: Historical Studies of Religion

Chair: Madhu Khanna

Tantra Foundation

13.30 - 14.00



Religious Studies and the Public Square: The Case of American Revolutionary Religion

Stephen A. Marini

Wellesley College

Popular political thought in America today is taken up with the question of whether or not the United States was founded as a "Christian nation." Advocates in its favor claim that a univocal definition of the Christian religion guided the nation's Founders and should define government policies and actions today. Critics reply that the country was founded on secular Enlightenment principles that explicitly excluded religion from any role in governance. This presentation will suggest how the academic study of religion can illuminate this debate without taking sides, thereby contributing to informed public discourse rather than intensifying conflict. It will argue that the answer to these rival claims is "both/and" rather than "either/or."

14.00 - 14.30



Interreligious Studies in India: Engaging with Raimon Panikkar's Theology

Shruti Dixit

University of St. Andrews

India, where faith is one of the most mentioned and abused elements in society, requires conscious integration of Interreligious Studies in the curricula of higher education to promote Religious Literacy. Courses on Interreligious Studies should be taught at secular institutions, not as faith-based but rather as people-centric. Drawing on Catholic theologian Raimon Panikkar's pluralist theology and his concept of the pluralistic nature of truth, this paper will explore its relevance in present-day India. It will discuss how higher education institutions in the country can incorporate Interreligious Studies in their curricula, an urgent need for alleviating communal unrest, stereotypes, and an ill-informed fear of the other.

14.30 - 15.00



Sisters as Ethnographers: Documenting Colonial India in the Loreto Schools

Alexandra Verini

Ashoka University

Catholic nuns are a vital and often underrecognized influence in religious and pedagogical life in India. Unlike male orders like the Jesuits, they exist largely in the margins of scholarly work. This paper will explore their religious impact in India both during the British Empire and thereafter. Combining the frameworks of religious studies, gender studies, and anthropology, and examining documents from the Loreto Sisters (the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary) as a case study, it will draw attention to how these religious women influenced the trajectory of girls' education across North India while being reshaped by their Indian encounter. It will not only highlight the significance of studying the Catholic religious order but also for studies of the interactions between religions in India.

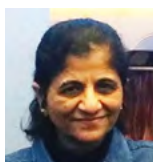
15.00 - 15.30

Q&A

15.30 - 16.00

Coffee Break

16.00 - 16.30



Concluding Remarks

Pankaj Jain, FLAME University

Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, Wellesley College



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