

DHARMA ACADEMY OF NORTH AMERICA

DANAM CONFERENCE 2010

ABSTRACTS

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 29

SESSION 1

Theme: Gynocentric Matrix of Indic Traditions: Dharma, Culture and the Feminine
Convener: Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, Nassau Community College, New York
Presider: Phyllis Herman, California State University, Northridge

Pankaj Jain, University of North Texas
Ecofeminism and the Bishnois of Rajasthan

The story of Indian ecofeminism should probably start with Amrita Devi, a Bishnoi woman who led a massive sacrifice for the protection of trees in September 1730 in the village of Khejadali, near Jodhpur. As many as 363 Bishnoi men and women, led by Amrita Devi, sacrificed their lives to protect the khejari trees from the soldiers of the king Abhay Singh of Jodhpur. Bishnoi legend is challenged by the Rajput community. Many Rajputs rejected the tale of the Khejadali sacrifice widely popular among Bishnois. However, in the documentary “*Willing to Sacrifice*”, Gajsingh did agree about an incident that took place in Khejadali that led to the royal ordinance prohibiting hunting in the Bishnoi villages. Another local Rajput Maharaja of village Bhadrarajun agreed to the Bishnoi sacrifice in a documentary made by Veg TV. The actual site of this sacrifice has been turned into a huge martyr place adorned with a number of signboards and memorials. In my opinion, various other citations discredit the view of those Rajputs who dismiss the massacre at Khejadali as a pious mythology or a fictional account. Rajasthan High court also accepted it as a historic event before establishing the Amrita Devi Award.

Ramdas Lamb, University of Hawaii – Manoa
Dharma, Females, and the challenge of education in rural Chhattisgarh

For the past three decades, I have been working in Chhattisgarh, India, with village youth, primarily from poor Scheduled Caste (SC) families. Several of the issues that have most interested me during that time have been how rural SC youth, especially poor females, conceive their relationship to Hinduism, to their traditional culture, and to the caste Hindu society in which they live. It has often been said in India that men are the protectors of dharma while women are its abode. Using this analogy, the way village females in the current generation of students learn about and relate to their religious and cultural traditions can reveal much about the future of traditional dharma and associated concepts in India. One of the major elements that is affecting this relationship is the way that contemporary government education addresses, or fails to address, these issues.

Seeking to avoid any confrontation with central government restrictions on promoting any one specific religion in schools, most teachers today minimize or even ignore reference to any belief system. Along with this is a general silence on the issues of virtues connected with traditional dharma, such as truth, non-violence, morality, etc. This paper analyzes the effect this education system is having on village female students, the analysis being based to a large extent on dozens of interviews with female students and women in rural Chhattisgarh conducted over the last four years.

The paper also discusses the role that other various factors play in the life of school-aged girls in rural Chattisgarh regarding academic learning, cultural knowledge, and the practice of dharma. The factors to be addressed include family economics, available academic education. An extremely important variable is the girl's mother, including elements such as the educational status of the mother, and the types and qualities of the mothers' relationships in the home. Together, these are the dominant factors in determining whether a girl will go to school and the degree to which she will relate and adhere to traditional concepts of dharma and culture.

Kathleen Erndl, Florida State University – Tallahassee

When a Woman Becomes Chandika”: Justice, Violence, and the Feminine in a Popular Hindi Film

In the Sanskrit sacred text, *Devi-Mahatmya*, in times of crisis when the cosmic moral order has been usurped by demons and the gods are helpless to do anything about it, the Goddess appears in order to destroy evil and re-establish harmony. Similarly, on the human level, in various folk and regional traditions throughout India, an ordinary woman subjected to oppression, takes on the power of her divine counterpart, transforming into a fierce Goddess to avenge the injustice done to her or her community. This theme of feminine (divine/human) retribution, repackaged in modern political and social contexts, has emerged in popular Indian cinema (including Hindi, as well as regional cinemas such as Tamil and Telugu) as a sub-genre, which has been called “avenging women” (Gopalan, 1997). Such films present an image of women counter to the docile, obedient daughter and wife or the sex-object of the “male gaze,” beginning with the character Radha, played by Nargis in *Mother India* (1957, directed by Mehboob Khan, reaching a peak in the 1980s with a spate of films such as *Pratighaat* (“Revenge” 1987, directed by N. Chandra), and continuing to the present day. This paper analyzes the film *Anjaam* (“Outcome”, 1994, directed by Rahul Rawail), starring Madhuri Dixit and Shah Rukh Khan. The appeal of this film lies in its deep resonance with the myth of the Goddess killing the Buffalo Demon, one of the most popular in the Hindu tradition, and also the way in which the narrative, dialog, and song-dance sequences open up discourse about female sexuality, women’s power, traditional and modern women’s roles, the corruption of the State versus the sacrality of “Mother India”, and the virtue of personal sacrifice. An excellent example of the resurgence of the “feminine principle” in popular culture, it provides a vision of what may happen when, in the words of the film’s refrain, “a woman becomes Chandika.”

Frederique Appfel-Marglin, Smith College (Emerita)*Enacting the World with the Goddesses of Orissa*

This paper proposes the thesis that in Orissa, deities in general and goddesses in particular, embody at once some aspect of the non-human world such as trees, rivers, the sea, the earth, a mountain, etc. *and* some aspect of the human world such as human speech, human form and manner of communicating, engaging in gift exchange and so forth. Deities are part of an other-than-human world that does not exist *above* nature and therefore is not *supernatural*. Drawing on recent feminist science studies, the paper argues that the non-human possesses agency on a par with humans and that deities embody the entanglement between humans and the non-human parts of the world. The paper questions the ontological divide between a nature defined as everything that is not made by humans and culture as everything that is not nature. It questions the assumption that nature is something that is pre-given and therefore universal. It proposes a view of ritual as the making of continuity and place in which both humans and other-than-humans together bring about a certain kind of reality.

Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, Nassau Community College, Garden City, NY*Dance of Light at the Feet of a Dark Girl: Kali in Kazi Nazrul Islam's Songs*

In this paper I will present Kazi Nazrul Islam, a Muslim poet from Bengal, whose Kali songs are the most beloved ones in Bengal to reveal another layer of what I have called the Gynocentric matrix of Indic sensibilities where the Great Mother's powerful and continuous presence provides a seamless web of plural religiosities that cannot be labeled under monomaniacal obsessions of any kind. I will look at a small number of Nazrul's Kali songs that reflect multiple ways that he imagines his mysterious Kali to argue that there are Shakta intimations in his works that co-exist with his Islamic, Marxist, Feminist and many other poems/songs. It is this Gynocentric matrix of Indic paths that has created a structure where a Sufi consciousness effortlessly mingles with the Shakta tradition finding its greatest expression in Nazrul's Shyama songs celebrating Kali.

SESSION 2**Theme: Feminism in Dharma Traditions**

Convener: Rita Sherma, Taksha University and ITBB

President: Kathleen Erndl, Florida State University

Phil Goldberg, Taksha University*The Feminization of Guru Teachings and Transmissions in the West*

The most popular guru in the West is a woman who gives hugs, not a man who gives lectures. This is just the most visible sign of the feminization of American neo-Hinduism over the last twenty to thirty years. The trend is discernible in both established teaching organizations and in the larger world of unaffiliated yogis, meditators and chanters.

Based on in-depth research for a forthcoming book, this paper will delineate and analyze the primary expressions of what might be called shaktification.

These inclinations include: the extraordinary popularity of kirtan (2,000 young people attended the Woodstock-like Bhaktifest last summer); the ascent of the Divine Feminine in devotional practice (e.g., mantras associated with Kali and Durga are heard as often as those of Krishna and Shiva); less emphasis on renunciation and transcendence, and more on embodiment, immanence and in-the-world engagement (e.g., social and environmental activism, often led by women); the advent of female gurus; the rise of female teachers and leaders, and a corresponding shift from authoritarian to more democratic leadership styles. While some of this can be viewed as an adaptation to Western-style feminism, it is more accurately seen as an acceptance of an Indic-based feminism, in which traditionally feminine modes of expression are empowered rather than attempting to masculinize the feminine. The paper will explore the implications of this feminization for the future of dharmic teachings in the West.

Veena Howard, University of Oregon

Gandhi's Understanding of the Feminine

One of the most controversial issues surrounding Gandhi is his construction of the feminine. His understanding of the feminine and its power integrates classical Hinduism's view of the divine feminine principle and the models of womanhood with his vision of the ideal feminine for the modern world. Even though many have acknowledged Gandhi's unique contributions in addressing the oppressive patriarchal customs of child-marriage, dowry, and gender inequality, as well as his attentiveness to bringing women into the public sphere, his vision of the ideal feminine is often viewed as complex and controversial. An emphasis on the highly debated facets of Gandhi's own sexuality has perhaps overshadowed a legacy of efforts aimed towards the welfare of women and strong affirmations of women's worth.

Undoubtedly, Gandhi's use of traditional models of feminine principles and virtues with which to express his vision of the free, powerful, autonomous, yet self-sacrificing woman can cause ambivalence and suspicion; especially as such traditional motifs have often been improperly used to increase women's dependence and disempowerment. In this paper, by analyzing Gandhi's own words, I attempt to reconstruct his highly effective indigenous feminist hermeneutics.

Nikky Singh, Colby College

Feminist Perspectives from Sikh Dharma

This paper addresses the disjunction between the liberative, feminist pulse of Sikh sacred text and its interpretation within a patriarchal social context. For the Sikhs, the Guru Granth is the basis of their philosophy, centre of their rituals and ceremonies, and provides the grounding for their personal life. And this scripture has great significance for women—both from a theological and psychological perspective. However, in the sphere of everyday life, arranged marriages, dowry, female feticides, honor codes, and other

oppressive customs prevail. Globalism is creating a whole new set of patriarchal burdens for the community.

I will explore some of the vital feminist symbols and images permeating the sacred text. Why have these textual ideas not percolated into daily life? How can the process of hermeneutics and translation retrieve their literary force? How do we transform literary images into societal reality so gender-justice is practiced?

Sherry Fohr, Converse College

Inadvertent Feminism in Jainism

There are currently four times more Jain nuns than monks. These Jain demographics are partly due to some inadvertent feminism in Jainism's history. This inadvertent feminism was not deliberate in its creating relatively equal rights and opportunities for men and women within renunciation, but nevertheless did just that. Perhaps the most important component of this inadvertent feminism was the preservation of aparigraha (non-attachment/non-possession) and itinerancy among orders of Jain renunciators, despite periods of laxity in the medieval period. This meant that Jain nuns did not become competition for monks for larger donations, and therefore were never undermined or neglected as nuns were in Indian Buddhism.

Rita Gross, University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire

New Perspectives on Models of Female Empowerment in Buddhist History

Those opposed to any change or improvement in the status of women in Asian religious traditions often use the argument that such changes would involve nothing but an imposition of Western values on Asian traditions. This argument amounts to a claim that, by themselves, members of Asian religious communities would never protest or seek to ameliorate the low status and limited opportunities that women in these traditions sometimes face.

However, this is not the case, at least not for many segments of the Buddhist world. In this paper, I will explore writings in the world of Theravada Buddhism that elevate the most important women in the life of the historical Buddha, his foster mother Prajapati and his aunt Yashodhara, to a nearly equal status with the Buddha himself. These stories are found in Theravada sources despite the fact that in the more familiar canonical sources, these women, especially the Buddha's wife, have only minor status and were not the subject of much interest or story-telling. If someone today were to create such stories, they would immediately be castigated as merely the results of foreign Western feminist input. But these stories first began to be told nearly two thousand years ago and have been added to ever since. Thus, one cannot reject contemporary "feminist" changes to Asian religions because they must always be contrary to the Asian essence of these traditions. There are many examples of "feminist-like" innovations throughout the history of Buddhism, at least. I suspect that such innovation is also found in the other major Asian traditions.

SESSION 3**Theme: Representations of the Feminine in the Modern Period****Convener:** Kusumita P. Pedersen, St. Francis College**President:** Purushottama Bilimoria, University of Melbourne**Elisabeth Benard, University of Puget Sound***The Jetsunma Phenomena in Tibetan Buddhism*

Among Tibetan Buddhist female practitioners, very few are given the prestigious title of Jetsunma—the holy one, the highly realized one or one who is worthy of reverence. There are two main ways to receive this title. One way is by developing one's religious practices that is evident to other highly realized people. One of the most famous is Jetsunma Shungseb or Ani Lochen who was a Chod master and lived over 100 years in harsh conditions. Another way is to be born in a religious family who has produced important lamas or religious teachers. The two best known families where a daughter becomes a Jetsunma at birth are the Sakya Khon family and the Mindrolling family.

In this presentation I will focus on the second way and argue that these Jetsunmas are similar to recognized reincarnations or tulkus. They have status from birth, they have their own residences or labrangas that are saved for them generation after generation and they are given estates which provide income and many necessities. The Jetsunmas are taught at a young age the important religious texts, rituals and accompanying practices. They are encouraged and supported to pursue religious practices including the long but requisite retreats. Everything is provided for them to become strong religious practitioners. Thus in this presentation I will discuss the Jetsunma phenomena which have not been examined well in Tibetan scholarly research.

Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, Emory University*The Enactment and Aesthetics of Female Impersonation: Performing Satyabhama in Telugu South India*

In the performance traditions of Telugu South India, Satyabhama is regarded as the beloved wife of Krishna, second only to her rival co-wife Rukmini. While many Hindus today might view Radha as Krishna's primary consort, it is Satyabhama who has captured the imagination of Telugu performers. Satyabhama's importance within Telugu performance traditions is most apparent in Kuchipudi, a classical dance style from the sixteenth century in which only *brahman* males were able to perform at the time of its inception. The earliest Kuchipudi dance-drama, *Bhamakalapam*, tells the story of Satyabhama and her separation from Krishna. Due to the original prohibition against women, *brahman* male dancers, utilizing highly stylized gestures and costumes, enacted the guise of Satyabhama. Although women now dominate the contemporary Kuchipudi stage, the *female impersonation* of Satyabhama by male dancers remains a characteristic feature of this dance form.

The first objective of this paper will be to examine how contemporary Kuchipudi female impersonators enact the femininity of Satyabhama's character. When profiling these artists, I will turn to Bharata's *Natyasastra* by focusing on how the male Kuchipudi dancer utilizes bodily movements (*angika abhinaya*), modes of speech (*vacika abhinaya*), and costume (*aharya abhinaya*) to construct Satyabhama's femininity. The second objective of this paper extends beyond the scope of these performers to examine the aesthetics of female impersonation more broadly. This paper will suggest that within the Telugu performative sphere, it is the Kuchipudi female impersonator, rather than the female dancer, who is the aesthetically preferred choice for the expression of Satyabhama's femininity.

Pramila Venkateswaran, Nassau Community College

A Face of the Feminine in Tamil Nadu: Reading Kannaki in Cilappatikaram

Illanko Adigal's epic, *Cilappatikaram*, has been part of the collective memory of Tamil culture, primarily because of its protagonist, Kannaki and her fight for justice. This paper will examine where and why Illanko makes the shift from describing Kannaki as a traditional pativrata to depicting her as a raging woman who subverts the rules in her effort to expose a terrible crime. What is the psychological nature of Illanko's epic that attracts storytellers, musicians, dancers and artists to revisit particular scenes that shape Kannaki, not Kovalan, as the protagonist, that places women whether they are housewives, courtesans, or monks in positions of respect, and that questions the nature of justice? The role of the goddess of Madurai and Kannaki's apotheosis into the goddess Pattini speak of the underlying ethos of Tamil culture's understanding of womanhood and justice.

Carl Olson, Allegheny College

The Feminine Thread in Two Novels of Bankimchandra Chatterji

Bankimchandra Chatterji (born 1838) was an important Bengali writer in the nineteenth century. This paper proposes to examine the role of the feminine motif in his literary corpus by concentrating on two of his novels: *Anandamath, or the Sacred Brotherhood and Debi Chaudhurani, or the Wife Who Came Home*. Both of these novels are concerned with Goddess figures who are, respectively, divine and human personifications of Mother India. This paper examines what motivated Bankimchandra to implore this narrative strategy within the context of colonial India and the nationalistic politics of the period. Besides their social and political implications, Bankimchandra's two novels were also religious texts because he knew that the use of religion was an opportune way to convey his message to his readers about the identity between the Hindu Goddess and the country. Embodied within the *Anandamath*, there is a story about a song—*Vande Mataram*—that becomes the national song of independent India, and a source of controversy and tension between Hindus and Muslims and now conservatives and secularists. The song identifies India as a Mother Goddess, whereas the heroine Debi is a complex figure who is a rejected wife, becomes a bandit queen, represents for her followers a Goddess figure, and is symbolic of the land of India.

SESSION 4**Theme: The Feminine in Jainism**

Convener and Presider: Anne Vallely, University of Ottawa

Bradley Boileau, University of Ottawa

Between the Veil and the Vow: Ascetic Wifehood, Jain Sati, and the Devotional Cult of Rajulmata at Mount Girnar

The sixteen *mahasatis* (great satis) in Jain narrative persist as liminal figures of devotion that embody the feminine struggle between the ideals of *pativrata* (devoted wife) and the *moksa-marg* (path of liberation). As both virtuous wives and exemplars of renunciation, each represent the constitutive tension present in the decisions that face many Jain women today, i.e. the choice to pursue a life in wifely dedication to family or one of passionless withdrawal from violence and attachment through mendicancy. Positioned between the worldly and the transcendent, the stories of these women also complicate and confuse the easy distinctions that reify Jain femininity into the categories of *sravika* (laywoman) and *sadhvis* (nun).

The subject of this paper is Rajimati (also known as Rajul), the ‘wife’ of the twenty-second *jina* (or ‘conqueror’) Neminath and one of the *mahasatis*. While many Jains refer to her as Neminath’s wife, the pair did not marry at all: on their wedding day, Nemi’s rejection of marriage and the killing of animals that led to his *diksa* (initiation) transformed Rajimati from unwed bride to lamenting widow without the actual binding act. In this way, M. Whitney Kelting has shown in her book *Heroic Wives* (2009) that Neminath’s ‘social death’ paved the way for Rajimati’s simultaneous portrayal as wife and ascetic in her dedication to him even as she became a nun herself. Reflecting primarily on the work of Kelting, Sherry Fohr, and Manisha Sethi on Jain *satis*, this paper analyzes three narrative sources on this pair to argue that the concurrent presentation of Rajimati as *pativrata* and *sadhvis* blend together even to the point of constructing the advent of her initiation as a pseudo-marriage. Subsequently, this paper endeavours to explain how these juxtaposed identities infiltrate the devotional schema to Rajimati at the *Sri Girnarji Mahatirth* in Junagadh (Gujarat)---the Jain pilgrimage site where both Neminath and Rajimati are believed to have achieved *moksa* (liberation).

Christian Haskett, Washington & Lee University

The Visual Vocabulary of Possession Performance and the Categories of Jain and Woman

In attempting to make sense of possession in Jain temples, scholars encounter some problems. In many cases, the Jains do not act as we expect Jains to act, and the possessed do not act like we expect possessed people to act—in the latter case, they often seem to overact. One additional curiosity occurs in that, at least in some environments, possession is strongly gendered, inasmuch as all the possessed are female, and often clustered in the 10-25 year age group. In comparing observations from my own fieldwork with other accounts of possession in South Asia, I show that victims at Padmapura, a Jain temple in

Rajasthan are being possessed as women, even though they seek relief as Jains. This conclusion then suggests that we reconsider how Jain, woman, and possession have functioned as analytical and comparative categories, and how we use those categories to understand possession.

Nika Kuchuk, University of Ottawa

From Icon to Temple: The Embodied Presence of the Goddess Padmavati

Jainism is a tradition mostly known for its world-renouncing and ascetic aspects, for its doctrine of non-violence and individualistic non-theism. The lived religion, however, appears to be far more multifaceted, incorporating aspects of the pan-Indian goddess tradition and recasting them in a uniquely Jain incarnation. Drawing on ethnographic impressions, this paper explores some aspects of the devotional and cultic practices of the Jain goddess Padmavati, as well as some mythic and historical narratives bound up in it.

The goddess in Jainism can be seen as a contested territory, both literally and figuratively. While I had observed a wealth of devotional practices directed at goddesses (and Padmavati especially), attitudes from within the Jain community concerning goddess worship as a canonical Jain practice ranged from ambivalence, to reluctance, and even to dismissal - thus prompting this inquiry into her cult and significance. On the one hand, goddesses' roles as clan and land protectors, as well as the guardians of Jinas, lends them a specific function in the Jain sacred landscape; on the other, this allows them to be approached as divine powers in their own rights. Aspects of Padmavati's popular iconography are particularly revealing of her liminal position within Jain devotional life, as she is often positioned as negotiating between the goals of a human community and the ultimate goals of renunciation. I propose here that the embodied nature of the goddess worship addresses certain aspects of Jain personal as well as social and communal spiritual goals, and is especially relevant in contexts of collective embodiment (such as family or clan), and the meaning-making narratives pertaining to them.

Sherry Fohr, Converse College

Indigenous Feminism in Shvetambar Jainism

Nuns are currently a thriving population in Shvetambar Jainism and this is partly due to this sect's indigenous feminism. Part of this feminist discourse is the idea that women are better able to practice celibacy than men and can therefore more easily live a life of renunciation. This discourse is not immediately apparent because there are Jain texts that describe women as temptresses. However, this literature, that is negative about women, is not well known to Jains. Instead, the literature about women that Jains choose to emphasize concerns the *satis* or "virtuous women." The heroines of these *sati*-narratives are pious and chaste, and succeed in preserving their chastity despite men's efforts to seduce or rape them. Jain nuns with whom I conducted research told me that one of the reasons there are more nuns than monks in Jainism is that women are better able to remain chaste than men, an idea supported by the *sati*-narratives.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 30**SESSION 5** – NO ABSTRACTS FOR THIS PANEL

Theme: **Panel Discussion of *Interpreting Ramakrishna*, by Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana (Motilal Banarsidas, 2010)**

Convener: Kusumita P. Pedersen, St. Francis College

Presider: Jeffery Long, Elizabethtown College

Panelists:

Francis X. Clooney, Harvard Divinity School

Gerald James Larson, Indiana University, Bloomington (Emeritus), University of California, Santa Barbara (Emeritus)

June McDaniel, College of Charleston

Joseph Prabhu, California State University, Los Angeles

Anantanand Rambachan, St. Olaf College

Respondents:

Swami Tyagananda, Hindu Chaplain, Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston

Pravrajika Vrajaprana, Sarada Convent, Vedanta Society of Southern California

SESSION 6

Theme: **Selves and Experience: *Shankara and The Self Possessed***

Convener: Jack Llewellyn, Missouri State University

Presider: Brian Black, University of Lancaster

Andrew Fort, Texas Christian University

Shankara, Smith, and 'Experience'

Fred Smith's exploration of the experience of "the self possessed" is fascinating and raises a variety of provocative issues. When looked at in the context of Sankara's philosophical writing on the self, however, the significance of such experience seems to diminish considerably. While I want ultimately to affirm the value of investigating the issues his book raises, I also want to speak as an Advaitin purvapaksin to ask what exploring the "experience" of any awareness state is really worth in the pursuit of true self knowledge. To that end, I will spend much of my paper examining terms like

“experience,” “knowledge,” “self,” “person,” “consciousness,” “awareness,” and the like from the perspective of Sankara’s philosophical works, thus we will have to map the above with terminology like anubhava, vidya/jnana, atman, jiva, and brahman. This will raise questions like: what does it mean for the self (atman) to “experience” anything? And when the self becomes a distinct individuated “person” (jiva) with ordinary awareness, of what ultimate value is any of its “experience?” Put another way, the ever luminous self immediately knows (and causes) all experience, but does not experience anything. Meanwhile, the person (body/mind/sense aggregate) experiences all objects and ideas through the mind and senses, which are not ultimately real or important. The detached witness (saksin) would observe possession as just another superimposition (both veiling and projecting) on the self, no matter how dramatic or profound it might be for a person. Would a liberated being, knowing possession to be not real, ever be possessed, and how would they respond?

Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, University of Lancaster

The Self That Cannot Be Possessed: Sankara on the Self and Sankara’s Self

A dualist theory of personal identity informs literalist intuitions about possession: identity must be constituted by non-physical substances, which substances can then occupy physical forms (bodies) that are not “theirs”. Physicalism leaves no space for such intuitions, and interprets possession in terms of medical pathology, and simply removes meaning from traditions of possession. Fred Smith’s groundbreaking work offers interpretations of possession that provide narrative integrity to traditions of possession. However, it is interesting to note that classical Hindu thought, arising from the cultural milieu of possession examined by Smith, is ambivalent about it. Philosophical theories of atman often split personal identity from existential essence, raising the question of what could possibly possess a living human body, and how. In the case of the hagiographic story of Shankara’s possession of the king’s body, the possibility of incoherence becomes more pressing still, as Advaita has an even more minimalist reading of atman, one that raises deep questions about the phenomenology of possession. However, it might be the case that the very revisionist theory of self in Advaita leaves interpretive space for the narrative of possession, albeit from a radically self-refuting viewpoint.

Sthaneshwar Timalisina, San Diego State University

Embodiment and the Altered Ego: Interface between Shankara and a Shaman

The issues of embodiment and subjectivity, ubiquitous in the reports of possession and vividly addressed by Fred Smith in *The Self Possessed*, demand that we revisit classical and contemporary approaches to the person and the body. Although elementary readings of Shankara’s Advaita make embodiment insignificant to liberation and emotions a distant topic within the realm of his philosophy, a closer examination reveals that embodied experience is as crucial to Advaita as it is for the avasha-oriented techniques. Altering personal identity in possessed state becomes an example for the non-reliability of personalities in Advaita, although Shankara’s method of negation is somewhat different from the affirmative techniques found in Trika system and possession-experiences. What is congruent in these systems relying on possession and self-

realization is the ubiquity of experience in their discourse. For understanding Shankara's position on embodiment, this paper examines his commentary on the 'Section on the Deities' (Brahmasutra 1.3.26-33).

J. E. Llewellyn, Missouri State University

Knowing Kamashastra in the Biblical Sense: Shankara's Possession of King Amaru

In one of the most remarkable narratives recounted in Frederick Smith's *The Self Possessed* the protagonist is none other than the eighth-century philosopher Shankara. His most influential hagiography is the *Shankaradigvijaya*, said to have been written by Madhava/Vidyaranya, who lived in the fourteenth century. Here, to prepare for a debate over erotics, the renouncer occupies the body of a just-dead king, Amaru, to learn the art of love from his wives. This paper begins with the question: Given that erotics is a discipline about which learned treatises were written in Sanskrit culture, why is it necessary for Shankara to have had sex in order to argue about it? This opens up the broader question of the relationship between book learning and experience in the *Shankaradigvijaya*, as well as in Shankara's own writings.

The most provocative point that Smith makes about the material that he analyzes in *The Self Possessed* concerns South Asian notions of the permeable and changeable nature of the self. What does it say about the relationship between my body and my self if the latter can be fundamentally transformed by experiences that I have in the body of another? With his extreme Advaita understanding of the self, Shankara might seem an unlikely subject of questions like these. This paper will demonstrate that we can ask Shankara these questions, and get some complex and revealing answers.

Neil Dalal, University of Alberta

Clouding Self-Knowledge: The Ambiguity of Samskaras in Shankara's Theory of Liberation

Prior to his possession of King Amaru in the *Shankaradigvijaya*, Shankara soothes the doubts of his disciples and argues that knowledge of his self as non-dual Brahman is unwavering. He claims he will remain as a disinterested witness to his erotic practices and will not forget his true identity or duties. This paper takes up the striking fact that Shankara does indeed forget his identity, is consumed by his pleasures and royal responsibilities, and must be reminded by his disciples. Why and how would a liberated person forget his or her identity? Is it theoretically possible that the liberated person can be overwhelmed by desires and sense pleasures? These questions and the Amaru possession episode allude to the issue of mental impressions (samskara or vasana) somehow clouding the Advaitin's self-knowledge. This further leads to the necessity of some form of practice or reminder to reengage self-knowledge and neutralize obstructing samskaras. However, this sets up a potential contradiction in Shankara's theory of liberation, for in some places he appears to argue that nothing else is necessary to be done after liberating knowledge. In other places he appears to accept some form of practice post liberation. This paper will consider whether or not such implications can be drawn from Shankara's commentaries, whether Shankara is indeed contradictory, and whether we can resolve this apparent contradiction.