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Editorial

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RoSA again offers a view of the variety of topics and approaches contained within the broad subject of religions of South Asia. Two of the four articles are based on the textual traditions of ancient India, using very different philosophical approaches; the other two are field-based studies of contemporary India, looking at two very different situations.

Nina Petek ventures on well-trodden ground in her study of the *Bhagavad-Gītā,* but does so with unusual equipment. Using the insights of the German existentialist Martin Heidegger, who saw awareness of death as essential to authentic existence, and those of his French admirer and critic Emmanuel Levinas, who insisted on the importance of encounter with the Other, including the death of the Other, she offers a fresh examination of Arjuna's problem and Kṛṣṇa's teaching, concentrating on the theme of death. Starting with Arjuna's dismay at the prospect of the death of others in the coming battle, she looks at the place of death in the context of ideas about rebirth and *saṃsāra*. In this context, death is not final as it is for Heidegger or Levinas; it is only the way to another life, which itself is only one of many such lives. She then examines the significance of Kṛṣṇa's identification of himself with death (*BhG* 11.32). She distinguishes the final death of the liberated yogi from all the non-final deaths which precede it, and concludes that it is death that gives meaning to life.

Victor van Bijlert examines a much less familiar text, one of the four *kārikā*s of Gauḍapāda, who was the founder of Advaita Vedānta, or at least a key figure in its early development. Tradition records Gauḍapāda as the teacher of Śaṅkara's teacher, though modern scholarship dates them some centuries apart. One of these four texts, traditionally placed as the first, is a commentary on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad.* But the one examined here is the fourth, which was probably written first; unlike the others it is not based on the Upaniṣads, and uses the terminology of Mahāyāna Buddhism, referring explicitly to the work of Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu. At the same time, as this article shows, it uses the methods of the Nyāyasūtras. Van Bijlert examines in detail how Gauḍapāda takes a system based on the reality of the world and the reliability of sense data, and uses it to support a radical idealism. His careful study throws light on the complex relations between different schools of thought in ancient India, the nature of philosophical reasoning, and its relationship to soteriology.

Ketan Alder takes us into the contemporary world of political Hinduism with his participant-observation of an Indian school, which complements Kristian Niemi's more theoretical study of Indian religious education in *RoSA* 9.3. This school is in Jharkhand, a largely rural state of north-eastern India, with a considerable Santal population, which until 2000 was the southern part of Bihar. The school also has a distinctive ethos, being run by the Vanavāsī Kalyāṇ Kendra ('forest-dwellers' welfare centre'), which is affiliated to the Rāṣṭrīya Svayaṃsevak Saṅgh. The VKK regards ādivāsī or tribal people as potential Hindus, and Alder shows how the school makes them into actual Hindus through stotras, mantras, pūjās, and activities including service of the cow. Half a century after M. N. Srinivas introduced the term 'sanskritization', Alder watched children 'on Hinduism's margins' being taught to use Sanskrit words, to recite a mantra that used to be a mark of twice-born status, and to conform to norms of behaviour designated as *saṃskṛti.* While the relations between Hinduism and politics have largely been studied at the national level, Alder's concern is with individuals, and how they are imbued with Hindu ethics as formulated by the VKK. Scholars who are interested in the construction of Hinduism can consider how a particular form of Hinduism is constructed in young minds.

Those young Hindus and their teachers would probably not recognize the practices described by Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid in her article on temple dramas in central Kerala; they belong to a different world, ideologically as well as geographically. These dramas show the killing of the demon Dārikan by the goddess Bhadrakāḷi, a violent aspect of the goddess Bhagavati. The story was studied in its literary aspect by Noor van Brussel in *RoSA* 10.2, and we are glad to be able to follow her article with the present one. Pasty-Abdul Wahid has observed the performances over several years, and gained an insider's understanding of their meaning and purpose by interviewing performers, ritual officiants and temple managers. She shows how the dramas

not only enact the deed for which Bhadrakāḷi was created, but gratify her bloodthirsty nature with a gory spectacle. But Bhadrakāḷi's character varies in different temples: in some she is too peaceful, or too young, to enjoy the spectacle, so it is not performed. The presence of other deities can also affect whether or not it is performed, and if so how and where. Performance, therefore, is a matter of negotiation, in a world in which deities have individual tastes, and are autonomous and potentially dangerous agents—as they are in the world of the Western Himalayas described by Ehud Halperin in *RoSA* 10.3. A sub-topic, appearing mainly in footnotes, is the twentieth-century modification of some practices. Fake blood has replaced that of birds or animals, and where devotees representing Garuḍa used to be suspended by hooks inserted in their backs, they now dance on the ground, and have their backs briefly pierced with a needle.

It is gratifying to see the number of places in which South Asia religions are studied: one of the present articles is from the UK, and three from continental Europe. Unlike our last two issues, we have none from South Asia itself, but we look forward to seeing more soon.