

## Editorial

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Though Volume 13 of *RoSA* is dated 2019, it is actually appearing in 2021, as we have been lagging behind the calendar for some time. In the time of the coronavirus, we hope all our readers are able to continue their academic and other activities, even if they have to carry them out in unusual ways.

Two of our colleagues died while this issue was being prepared. Karel Werner, who as the founder of the Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions was intimately connected with the launching of *RoSA*, died on 26th November 2019. His work for the Symposium, and his support of the ensuing journal, are described by two of the editors in the obituary which follows. Nick Allen died on 21st March 2020. Nick had been a frequent participant in the Spalding Symposium, and he had contributed two articles to *RoSA*: ‘The Pāṇḍavas’ Five Journeys and the Structure of the *Mahābhārata*’ (*RoSA* 1.2 (2007): 165–81), and ‘Vedic Sacrifice and the Pentadic Theory of Indo-European Ideology’ (*RoSA* 9.1 (2015): 7–27). Both these articles arose from Nick’s interest in the comparative study of Indo-European mythology and ideology, which David Gellner describes in his tribute as ‘Nick’s greatest love’.

Four research articles follow, in chronological order of their subjects. Tse-fu Kuan’s ‘Moggallāna’s Journey to Another Buddha-field: How a Mahāyāna Narrative Crept into the *Ekottarika Āgama* (T 125)’ centres on the work of one of Chinese Buddhism’s noted translators, Zhu Fonian (fourth to fifth century CE). Readers may be surprised to find Buddhist terms and names

rendered in Pali rather than Sanskrit in what is clearly a Mahāyāna context. As Kuan explains, this is because the text appears to have been translated not from Sanskrit but from some Middle Indo-Āryan language (not necessarily Pali); he adds that many scholars of Buddhism are more familiar with Pali than with Sanskrit. The story translated involves rivalry between the *bhikkhus* Sāriputta and Moggallāna, travel between worlds, and extraterrestrial people whom Kuan aptly calls alien *bhikkhus*. This in turn involves astronomical figures—millions and billions, as well as imprecise but graphic ones such as ‘the sand of seven big rivers’. Both these ways of expressing numbers beyond ordinary comprehension were discussed by Alessandra Petrocchi in the context of Jainism, in ‘Philosophy of Space-Time in Early Jaina Thought: Quantification as a Means of Knowing’ (*RoSA* 10.3: 258).

We move forward to the tenth to twelfth centuries, and south to Bengal, with Archishman Sarker’s article ‘Popular Religion in the Pāla Period: Evidence from Iconographic Study of Four Female Deities from Northern Bengal.’ This small sample of sculptures, all housed in regional museums, is taken to represent the art history, and the underlying religious history, of the Varendra region, which was particularly prolific in the production of sculpture and other art forms. Sarker’s concern is not only with the objects themselves, but with the ways in which religious traditions, both Buddhist and Brahmanical, each of which had its corpus of textual prescriptions for iconography, adopted each of these goddesses in order to appropriate her popular cult. Another concern is with the history of the interpretation of these sculptures, and the history of the study of the antiquities of the region. Sarker shows that this region was insufficiently researched in the British period, and has since then suffered the effects of the 1947 partition. Not only is Varendra now divided between India and Bangladesh, but until 1971 it was divided between India and Pakistan, which took part of its heritage to Karachi.

The next article, ‘Religious Syncretism among Indian Muslims and its Manifestation in *Dargah* Practices: Case Studies of Three *Dargahs* in Kerala,’ takes us further south to Kerala, and to the present day, with some reference to a historical background going back to the first millennium CE. *Dargah* (from Persian *dargāh* ‘portal; threshold; palace’), is a term widely used in India and elsewhere for the tomb of a Sufi saint or *pīr*. R. H. Samseer and R. K. Bushra Beegom describe three such sacred places, with some account of the practices of devotees there, and their beliefs and experiences. Their ethnographic work is framed by a discussion of the nature of syncretism, and the opposition to it which they term puritanism. Samseer and Beegom show that many of the practices at the *dargahs* can be recognized as Hindu, and that they are attended by Hindus as well as Muslims. That is not problematic in the Hindu tradition, which can find the sacred in many places and persons; but Islam, especially the increasingly influential form of Islam, recognizes only three sacred places, in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, and condemns worship of any

human being. Nevertheless, Muslims who attend *dargahs* can consider themselves Sunni, and accuse the puritans of *bid'a* (innovation).

The subject of the last article is completely contemporary, and is not located in any region but in cyberspace. In 'The Cultural Matrix of the Online Hindutva Discourse in India,' Avishek Ray shows how the internet, while uniting the world, also divides it into bubbles or sphericules—an effect which he terms 'balkanization'. He observes the behaviour of unseen individuals, known only by pseudonyms, in an activity which seems trivial yet which occupies a large part of many people's attention. Because its content is so vast, there is no question of gathering a representative sample for this exercise in 'digital ethnography', as he explains; instead, he concentrates on three online threads. Like the previous article, this one also deals with syncretism and its opponents, in this case the upholders of Hindutva.

Like the diverse subjects of the main articles, the four book reviews in this issue cover an interesting diversity of interests within the study of religions of South Asia. A new translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* by Keya Maitra, which aims to provide a concise contextual introduction of the work for students of philosophy, is reviewed by Suganya Anandakichenin. Patrick McCartney evaluates Jerome Armstrong's detailed study of *Calcutta Yoga: Buddha Bose and the Yoga Family of Bishnu Ghosh and Yogananda*. Naomi Appleton's thoughtful summary of Oliver Freiberger's *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* highlights what can be gained from considering the categories we think with, and the methods we use, for scholarly exploration of religious phenomena. Finally, Tracy Coleman reviews the exploration of gender, difference, hierarchy and religion in *The Traffic in Hierarchy: Masculinity and Its Others in Buddhist Burma* by Ward Keeler. We are grateful to our reviewers, and our reviews editor Suzanne Newcombe, for their work in keeping us and our readers informed of the continuing development of our subject.