

## Editorial

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After two special issues—*RoSA* 13.3 on Gender, edited by Simon Brodbeck, and *RoSA* 14.1–2 on Tantra, edited by Paolo Rosati—*RoSA* returns to a general issue without a specific theme, and prepared by the above three editors. We present four articles: two from India, one from Pakistan and one from the Netherlands.

Starting as usual with the most ancient material, Birendranath Prasad's article 'Jaina and Brahmanical Temples and Political Processes in a Forested Frontier of Early Medieval Southwestern Bengal: A Study of Purulia' studies the political and social role of temples in the westernmost part of Bengal, adjoining Jharkhand, a forested region but also on a trade route, from the eighth or ninth century onwards. Besides the temples themselves, Prasad studies the 'hero stones', most of which are found within temple precincts, especially those of Jain temples. From published studies of this material, he draws tentative conclusions about state formation and political relations in the region, and about religious adherence, finding a deeper penetration of Jainism than has hitherto been recognized.

Siegfried Babajee's delightful article 'The Co(s)mic Vision: Humour in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*' examines notions of play and comedy in the *Purāṇa* and the ways in which humour is used as an alternative to formal religious instruction both to entertain and to communicate spiritual truth. Babajee explains that notions of laughter and levity are central to certain strands of

Hinduism, particularly Vaiṣṇavism, and that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s narratives employ humour as a deliberate and calculated strategy to convey the cosmic vision. In other words, comedy weaves together the mundane perception of the world with the transcendence and playful nature of divinity and its creation. Babajee concludes that in the case of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, laughter has a redemptive quality. Listening to the stories of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu, the audience is liberated while being entertained. People can laugh their way to enlightenment.

In 'Sufi Shrine as Space of Hegemonic Struggle in Pakistan: An Ethnographic Account', Seemab Zahra, Muhammad Bilal and Shafia Azam question the presentation of Sufi shrines as peaceful places, uniting Hindu and Muslim, as seen by many while the subcontinent was being partitioned in the mid-twentieth century, or as homes of the gentler aspect of Islam which has been sought since 9/11. The three authors have studied the Bari Imam shrine near Islamabad, dating from the seventeenth century, conducting ethnographic fieldwork at and around the shrine, and structured interviews with people concerned with it. They also examine its history, tracing not only clashes between Sunni and Shia since the creation of Pakistan, but much older disputes between lineages claiming to be the rightful custodians of the shrine and recipients of its revenues. They point out weaknesses in government control of such revenues, and show how disputes have led to violence and even murder. In conclusion, they call for further study of the political and economic struggles underlying religious conflict, and highlight the danger of characterizing some groups as violent and others as peaceful.

Conflict at religious sites, and its causes which often lie outside the realm of religion, are also the subject of Ivy Dhar's article 'Right to Pray: The Tensions between Gender and Faith Traditions in India'. It takes its main title from a contemporary movement protesting against restrictions on women's entry to Hindu temples. As a slogan, 'Right to Pray' is evocative but misleading, since there is usually nothing to stop women praying at home, in the outer part of a temple, or elsewhere; the real dispute is over entry to the inner sanctum, which in many temples is restricted to brahmin men. Dhar concentrates on two temples: Shani Shingnapur in Maharashtra, which excludes all women and girls, and Sabarimala in Kerala, which excludes those aged between 10 and 50, who may be menstruating. The matter has reached the courts, where a temple is considered a public place, not the abode of a deity, and where the legal concept of rights, presumed to be universal and equal, conflicts with the Dharmaśāstric concept of *adhikāra*—the entitlement of certain people to do certain things. It is ironic that *adhikār* is used in Hindi to translate 'right'.

The editors take this opportunity to bid a public farewell to RoSA's copy-editor Audrey Mann and typesetter Christopher Allen, thanking them for their work which has made the journal a pleasure to handle and read, and wishing them a happy retirement. For many years Audrey has carefully

checked the articles to ensure that references are clear and consistent, and spelling and punctuation conform to our style guide, besides spotting countless typing errors. Chris has taken the text supplied by the authors, and adjusted by the editors and Audrey, and turned it into what you see on the page. Between them, they have avoided such distracting inelegances as ‘rivers’ of white space meandering down the page, or ‘stacks’ of lines ending with the same word, or with hyphens. It is the kind of work that is most successful when it is least noticed, and we are glad to be able to thank them for it here. We also welcome their successors, Hamish Ironside as copy-editor and Jill Sweet as typesetter, and look forward to working with them.