Editorial

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This issue of RoSA has only three articles, but they are substantial. They range chronologically from Vedic times to the present, and geographically from South Asia eastwards to Cambodia and westwards to Mexico. Each of the authors takes a subject which is important in itself, and goes beyond it to find sometimes unexpected connections.

In ‘The Bhagavad Gītā and Beyond: Synchronic Strategy for Sanskrit Narrative Literature’, Raj Balkaran takes one of the most familiar texts of all Sanskrit literature, the Bhagavad Gītā, and explores its use of the literary device of placing stories within stories, and also placing didactic discourses on a great range of topics within stories which themselves are within stories. The Mahābhārata is the most complex example of this practice. What interests Balkaran particularly is the hermeneutic import of the practice: how a consideration of who is speaking, to whom, in what circumstances and for what purpose, illuminates the meaning of the discourse. That the teaching of the Gītā is spoken to Arjuna by one who is both his charioteer and God, in order to overcome his refusal to fight in the battle which is the centre of the Mahābhārata, is well known; it is explicit in the Gītā itself. But Balkaran’s study goes beyond the Gītā to Saṃjaya’s narration to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, of which the Gītā is a part, and beyond that to Vaiśaṃpāyana’s narration to Janamejaya. Beyond even that is the ‘model reader’—a term for which
Balkaran acknowledges Umberto Eco—for whom the *Mahābhārata* itself has meaning. Part of Balkaran’s argument is that, whatever may be said about interpolations, accretions and changes in outlook, the people who built that uniquely complex edifice which is the *Mahābhārata* knew what they were doing.

Simona Cohen’s article ‘The Indian Hair-Wringer Apsaras and her Discriminating Goose: Meanings and Migrations’ deals with iconography, and is profusely illustrated. But it also goes beyond iconography into textual sources ranging from Veda to *kāvya*, while the *apsaras*’s companion, the *haṃsa*, leads us into ornithology. In the masculine world-view represented in much of Sanskrit literature, the alluring female *apsaras* can be part of the reward awaiting the male seeker of immortality, as she is in the *Kauśītaki Upaniṣad*; but more often she is the honey-trap set by the gods to ensnare the man whose asceticism threatens their power. A female figure wringing water from her hair appears from the first century CE, and is often accompanied by a *haṃsa*; these two motifs, separately and together, have a long and complex history which Cohen traces. In various branches of literature, the *apsaras* is associated with water and with *soma*, and also with aquatic birds; while the *haṃsa*, as well as being a symbol of the immortal ātman, is famed for its ability to separate milk from water, which can symbolize the discernment needed for salvation. What brings the *apsaras* and the *haṃsa* together is a puzzle which Cohen sets out to solve. Water flowing from long hair recalls the myth of Gaṅgā flowing through Śiva’s hair to purify the sons of Sagara. In Theravāda traditions of Southeast Asia, though not in the Pali canon, it is the earth goddess who wrings water from her hair as the Bodhisattva reaches enlightenment, washing away the forces of Māra. All this, and more, is dealt with in Cohen’s wide-ranging study.

The last article is based not in South Asia but in Mexico, and goes beyond it into other Latin American countries. In ‘Promoting “Yogi Art”: Yoga, Education and Nationalism in Post-revolutionary Mexico’, Adrián Muñoz examines the thought of José Vasconcelos (1882–1959), a leading Mexican intellectual of the 1920s. This was a period when the country was recovering from a decade of civil war, and Vasconcelos, who headed both the new Ministry of Education and the National University, was one of those who consciously tried to shape its future. At the same time, people as varied as Gandhi, Aurobindo, Nehru, and the Marxist M. N. Roy were trying to shape the future of India, while also shaping views of its past; but it was not the intensely political thought of contemporary India that attracted Vasconcelos, but what he understood as the heritage of ancient India. For him, yoga was a key feature of this heritage, as it was for many Westerners attracted to India; but Muñoz shows that Vasconcelos’s adoption of yoga is distinct from the anglophone yoga which has been the subject of many recent studies. A remarkable feature of Vasconcelos’s thought is that he saw the application of the name ‘Indian’ to the non-European people of the Americas not
as an error, nor as an inconvenient case of homonymy, but as a pointer to the future of humanity; Indian culture as he understood it, including indigenous American culture, was to be the model for Mexican culture, which in turn was to be the model for the world. He opposed the acceptance of Europe as the source of culture; he also opposed the cultural dominance of North America with its valorization of material progress—often at the cost of human freedom, especially that of indigenous and African-American people. Like other Western admirers of India, he favoured its spiritual values against the material values which threatened to dominate his world. It is curious that while Vasconcelos was forming these ideas, M. N. Roy was in Mexico, writing and lecturing and forming political contacts: a materialist Indian elephant in the spiritual Indian room that Vasconcelos was constructing.

Each of these three articles, on very different aspects of South Asian religious traditions, gives us plenty to think about beyond its immediate subject. While they were being peer-reviewed, revised and prepared for publication, all of us—editors, authors, anonymous reviewers, book reviewers, readers, the staff of our publisher Equinox, and the freelancers who work for it—have been affected in one way or another by the pandemic. What we do for RoSA has carried on much as before, because it does not depend on meeting in person, travelling, or even touching paper that others have touched. But our lives have all been affected in various ways by the virus and by the precautions we have to take against it. It is hard to imagine what it would have been like if the infection had come before electronic communication became commonplace. Because of Covid, electronic communication has become more commonplace. Such communication has opened up possibilities such as attending conferences online that we might never have had the time or money to travel to, but it has also made us painfully aware of its limitations.