As we mentioned in our previous editorial, RoSA and its fellow-workers have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The editors and reviews editor have met online, whereas we used to meet in London. Those meetings were more convivial, but we maintained the distinction between a work event and a party, by starting with coffee and sometimes finishing with lunch. During the pandemic we have continued to communicate with contributors by email, as we always have done, and such correspondence has led to personal friendships across the world. Since the beginning of 2020 many of the messages we have sent and received have expressed concern about the correspondents’ health and that of their families. Some have had their research activities restricted by precautions against infection. Several articles have been delayed because the authors had suffered bereavements, or had themselves caught the disease, or had found themselves seriously debilitated by its after-effects. We take this opportunity to express our concern for all those readers and others whose lives have been affected.

As in RoSA 15.2, we have only three articles, but they are substantial, and they range from ancient times to the present, each article having some depth of chronological focus.

Stuart Ray Sarbacker’s article ‘Pātañjala Yoga and Buddhist Abhidharma on the Sources of Extraordinary Accomplishments (Siddhi and Ṛddhi):
The Constructed Mind (Nirmāṇacitta) as a Framework for Understanding Religious and Psychedelic Experience’ is a tribute to the late Gerald Larson (1938–2019), a great scholar of Sāṃkhya and Yoga. The article explores the similarities between the Yogasūtra and the Buddhist Abhidharmakośa, with their commentaries, particularly in their accounts of the supranormal states that can be reached by following their respective paths; these states are called siddhi ‘achievement’ in the Yogasūtra, and ṛddhi ‘prosperity’ in the Abhidharmakośa. These similarities are sufficient to enable us to think of a single body of thought and practice directed towards achieving supranormal states, cultivated within two traditions of discipline. The two texts agree that such states can result from meditation, karma (the Yogasūtra says more specifically tapas), birth, or the use of mantras, or of herbs (oṣadhi). This last way of achieving such a state leads Sarbacker to consider modern ideas and practices around mind-altering drugs, and how their neuropsychological effects may be related to the ancient Indian concept of the ‘constructed mind’ (nirmāṇacitta). This part of the article, unlike the textual part, is necessarily brief and tentative, but invites further research of a very different kind.

The use of earlier ideas in a modern context appears also in Ghulam Hussain’s article ‘Politics of Sufism in Pakistan: Contemporary Political Relevance of Shah Abdul Latif as an Icon of Sufi Sindh’; however, here this use is not proposed but is examined critically. The article introduces a poet of eighteenth-century Sindh, and discusses how he has been remembered in colonial times by indigenous and Western writers, and in post-colonial Pakistan. Hussain shows how Latif, who was both a Sufi and a Sayed, has been recruited by Sindhi leaders of the present day as a ‘myth’ (using the word in the academic rather than the journalistic sense) to validate an image of the Sindhi nation, and of Sindh as a land of Sufis, and therefore of interreligious harmony and indifference to caste status, or alternatively as the maternal land of the Sayeds—who claim descent from the family members (ahl-i-bayt) of the Prophet Muhammad, and who are also the dominant caste of Sindh. Such recruitment of a historical figure ignores the political and social differences between his time and ours, and Hussain examines these differences. He also points to instances of patriarchy, caste privilege and caste endogamy in Latif’s poetry, which disqualify him as a champion of equality. Besides studying Latif’s corpus and what has been written about him since his time, Hussain uses interviews with devotees at Latif’s shrine, who emphasize his status as a Sayed and his aloofness from ‘low’ castes.

In ‘Laying Out Feast-Offerings: Offering Meat, Feasting Together and Sharing with the Gods’, Indira Arumugam looks at theories of sacrifice in the light of her own fieldwork. She dismisses the idea that Hindus are predominantly vegetarian, and discusses the place of animal sacrifice and meat offerings in Hindu worship. Describing fieldwork in Vaduvur in Tamil Nadu, which supplied the material for her earlier article ‘Touchable Gods’ (RoSA 13.2), she again emphasizes the idea of kinship between certain gods, particularly
tutelary deities of kin groups, and their worshippers. Covid restrictions prevented her from returning to Vaduvur, so she turned instead to a different kind of fieldwork, as a participant observer in the practices of her own family in Singapore. These practices occur shortly before the autumn festival of Deepavali (Sanskrit dīpāvali, Hindi dīvālī), or before the winter solstice festival of Poṅgal. (In the equatorial climate of Singapore, however, ‘autumn’ and ‘winter’ have little meaning.) Here, rather than gods being treated as kin, kin are treated as gods: food is offered to ancestors, in this case to the author’s paternal grandparents, who came from Vaduvur to Singapore in the 1930s. Traditions rooted in an agricultural community have been transformed in an urban setting. Whereas in Vaduvur animals raised by the worshippers or their neighbours are slaughtered as part of the ritual, in Singapore the offerings include not only meat that has been bought in raw form and cooked at home, but food bought ready-cooked, reflecting the gastronomic riches of the multi-ethnic city.

This is the last issue before we have a change in the editorial team. In RoSA 16.1 we will welcome Karen O’Brien-Kop and Arkotong Longkumer as editors, joining Anna and Dermot to make a team of four. At the same time, Simon Brodbeck will move to join Suzanne Newcombe as an additional reviews editor. The wide subject range of RoSA, in terms of geographical areas, historical periods, religious traditions and academic disciplines, is a challenge both for editors and for reviews editors. The editors’ work of selecting articles and advising their authors, and the reviews editors’ work of selecting books to review, demand knowledge and understanding of the religious traditions themselves, of the various ways in which they have been and are being studied, and of the ever-expanding literature about them, both academic and more popular, and both detached and confrontational. Editors and reviews editors also need annotated address lists of scholars who might be able and willing to write anonymous and confidential reviews of articles, or named and publishable reviews of books.

Faced with these tasks, we are glad that Karen’s interest in Sanskrit textual traditions, particularly yoga, and her questioning of the boundary between Hindu and Buddhist traditions, together with Arkotong’s Himalayan background and his anthropological and political concern with ethnic and religious identity, will complement Anna’s background in an older tradition of anthropology, her wide interests in living Hindu traditions, and her more recent involvement in gender studies and peace studies, and Dermot’s interest in ancient Sanskrit texts and their modern interpretations. Suzanne’s interest in contemporary religious movements, and in modern yoga, will be complemented by Simon’s by no means exclusive concern with the Mahābhārata and other ancient texts.