

# 39th Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions 2014

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## Abstracts

Naomi Appleton (Edinburgh University) naomi.appleton@ed.ac.uk

### *The Renouncing Royals of Videha across Buddhist, Jain and Hindu Narratives*

“Though Mithilā may be on fire, nothing of mine is burning!” So speaks a renouncing king of Videha, called Janaka in the Buddhist *Janaka-jātaka* and the *Mahābhārata*, and Nami in the Jain *Uttarādhyayana*. The latter name resonates with two other Jātaka stories, which tell of king Nimi/Nemi, another king of Videha famous for renunciation. That these characters are part of the same lineage is clear not only from their shared homeland, but also from genealogies such as that recounted by King Janaka in the *Rāmāyana*, in which he refers to previous King Janakas as well as a King Nimi. Not all the kings of Videha are famous for renouncing, but those that are share certain motifs across all three traditions of early South Asia. The paper will explore the interconnected narratives of the renouncing kings of Videha in an effort to understand how each of the three traditions—Hindu, Jain and Buddhist—used this motif and lineage to serve its own agenda. In so doing it will shed light on the connections between these traditions and the value of studying their narratives as part of a broader South Asian heritage.

Dr Naomi Appleton is Chancellor’s Fellow in Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her primary research interest is in the role of narrative in South Asian religious traditions. She is the author of *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism* (Ashgate, 2010) and *Narrating Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-life Stories* (CUP, 2014) and is currently working on an AHRC-funded project exploring the intersection of Buddhist, Jain and Hindu narrative elements, with Dr James Hegarty (see [storyofstoryinsouthasia.wordpress.com](http://storyofstoryinsouthasia.wordpress.com)).

Alice Collett (York St. John University) a.collett@yorks.j.ac.uk

### *Monumental Differences: Male-Female Teacher-Disciple Relations According to Buddhist Monument Inscriptions*

As part of my forthcoming monograph, *Pāli Biographies of Buddhist Nuns*, I explore differences between textual and inscriptional evidence, and what these might reveal about Buddhist

women in the early Indian context. One feature of pronounced difference is in teacher-disciple relationships. On Buddhist monument (stūpa) inscriptions we find a range of teacher-disciple relations that are not what we might expect from the texts. The Pāli corpus particularly, in extant form, leads us to suppose that monks and nuns were segregated just as the *Vinaya* sections for monks and nuns are, or the versified *Thera-Therīgāthā* is in its extant form. However, the evidence from inscriptions reveals teacher-disciple relationships that are not circumscribed around gender segregation. Recorded in the inscriptions are, as well as named female teachers with named female disciples, male teachers with female disciples, or with both male and female disciples, and also lineages consisting of, for example, male-female-female lines. In this paper, I will survey this inscriptional evidence and consider the ramifications of it in relation to our assumptions about gender relations in the early Indian Buddhist saṅgha. I will assess whether it might cause us to question the structure of extant Pāli texts in gender-segregated sections.

Dr Alice Collett is a Senior Lecturer at York St John University, and co-editor of *Buddhist Studies Review*. Since completing her Ph.D. in 2004, she has worked at universities in North America and the UK. She has published articles on women in early Indian Buddhism, and an edited volume entitled *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies*. She has just completed work on a monograph entitled *Pāli Biographies of Buddhist Nuns*, which was supported by an AHRC fellowship award.

Mahinda Deegalle (Bath Spa University)

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*Buddhist Extremist Confrontations with Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Contemporary Sri Lanka*

This paper aims to examine and contextualise the upsurge of extremist Buddhist movements in Buddhist societies, with an emphasis on Bodu Bala Sena (The Army of Buddhist Forces) in Sri Lanka. This extremist movement has brought about the collapse of good relationships that existed between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority. Confrontations of this extremist movement with religious and ethnic minorities have also brought the modern nation-state of Sri Lanka into difficult and chaotic political situations. Recent activism of Bodu Bala Sena, however, cannot be argued as a continuation of the political representation process of Buddhists in the Sri Lankan parliament initiated by the Buddhist monks' political party, Jathika Hela Urumaya in 2004. They share the aim of protecting Buddhist rights. But as an activist group, Bodu Bala Sena maintains a strong commitment to creating a pure form of Buddhism out of centuries of corruptions in the monastic life and ritual practices of Buddhists, including abuses and misuses of Buddhist symbols by commercial establishments and individuals. The paper will examine in detail the nationalist and religious ideologies of the Bodu Bala Sena and its members' activist contributions in creating a potential religious conflict in Sri Lanka.

Dr Mahinda Deegalle is Reader in Religions, Philosophies and Ethics at Bath Spa University. He has held a National Endowment for the Humanities Professorship at Colgate University, NY, USA. He is a committee member of the Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions. He is the author of *Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka* (SUNY 2006), and editor of *Dharma to the UK: A Centennial Celebration of Buddhist Legacy* (World Buddhist Foundation 2008) and *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (Routledge 2006).

Theodore Gabriel (University of Gloucestershire)

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*Concepts of Violence and Peace in Hinduism: Himṣā and Ahimṣā*

*Ahimṣā paramo dharmah*, says the *Mahābhārata*. The ontological nexus between various life forms, especially prominent in Advaita, can underwrite the supremacy of non-violence in Hinduism. The code of Vasiṣṭha also stresses the importance of non-violence. The *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali lists *ahimṣā* as a cardinal virtue for all ascetics. Therefore it is an important step towards *mokṣa*. Gandhi was one of the most prominent exponents of *ahimṣā* in modern times. While we can discern some influence of Jainism and also of Jesus Christ on Gandhi's thinking, he was primarily a Hindu. But Gandhi's perception of *ahimṣā* goes much higher, and he verily identifies *ahimṣā* with Truth or God. His approach to *ahimṣā* was dynamic, not passive. It is a sign of strength, not weakness. However, the concept of *niṣkāma karma* (desireless action) extolled in the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches that violence is indispensable in certain contexts and indeed is the duty of certain castes. Moreover, the *Gītā* says that killing is an illusion. In recent times, for proponents of Hindutva and some of other organisations the concept of *ahimṣā* is being underplayed and symbols of militancy and an ideology counter to *ahimṣā* have been gaining ground.

Dr Theodore Gabriel was born in Kerala, India, and had his early education in Kerala and Madras. After teaching in India and the Lakshadweep Islands he joined the University of Aberdeen where he completed his MLitt in 1982 and PhD in 1986. Since 1986 he has worked in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Gloucestershire, teaching Islam and Indian Religions. He has published articles on Hinduism in South India, and contributed 10 entries to the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (2007) edited by Denise Cush. His monograph *Playing God: Belief and Ritual in the Muttappan Cult of North Malabar* was published in 2013 by Equinox Press.

James Hegarty (Cardiff University)

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*From False Teachings, Failing Bloodlines and Toxic Karma to their Several Opposites: The Economy of Religious Explanation in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain Narrative Traditions (to c. the 6th century CE)*

Hindu, Buddhist and Jain narratives exhibit parallel concerns with the tensions between genealogy, teaching lineage and karmic inheritance. While anti-Vedic traditions rejected hereditary religious authority, they could also karmically differentiate between individuals more or less capable of 'salvific' insight. The explanatory resources of early South Asian religious traditions are abundant. All three traditions also addressed their teachings to social realities. This meant dealing with temporal authorities, many of whom emphasised bloodline and dynastic destiny. Discussions of karma, genealogy and teaching lineage concerned not just the explanatory power and perceived effectiveness of a religious tradition, but also its institutional framework, its ethics and its compatibility with different forms of political authority. Using narratives from Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions (to c. the 6th century CE), I will compare their approaches to genealogy, teaching lineage, and karma, with reference both to epigraphy and to the monastic and socially didactic literature of the three traditions. In the latter, prescriptions for social organisation—monastic or secular—had to be pragmatic, making them an excellent foil for more high-flown literary imaginings. The triangulation of literary, 'legal' and epigraphic sources helps to delineate the audience of the narratives. The paper will develop a comparative approach to the tensions between genealogy, teaching lineage and karma within and between the three great 'isms' of early South Asian religious history.

Dr James M. Hegarty is Senior Lecturer in Indian Religions in the School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University. He is the author of *Religion, Narrative and Public Imagination in Early South Asia* (Routledge, 2012), as well as numerous papers on the role of narrative in the transmission and adaptation of religious knowledge in early, medieval and modern South Asia.

Lalan Kumar Jha (Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar, India)

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*A critical appraisal of vimutti (liberation) as depicted in Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism*

The Pali word *Vimutti* means total freedom. In Theravada Buddhism it has the technical meaning of escape from fetters or obstacles (*nivaraṇa*). Five kinds of *vimutti* have been explained: *vikkambhana-vimutti* (checking the *nivaraṇas* while practising the first trance (*jhāna*)); *tadaṅga-vimutti* (freedom from false views (*ditthis*) while cultivating the *nibbedha-bhagīya-samādhī*; *sammuccheda-vimutti* (removal and destruction of all ties or bonds (*samyojana*)); *patippassadhi-vimutti* (tranquillity of mind (*cittappassaddhi*) while attaining the fruit (*phala*)); and *nissana-vimutti*, equated with *anupādisesa-nibbāna* (liberation or emancipation after extinction of the body). The corresponding Sanskrit word *vimukti* means ‘emancipation’, and is equivalent to *mokṣa* (freedom from the cycle of birth and death). The equivalent terms in Buddhism and Jainism are *nibbāna* (emancipation) and *kevalya* (freedom from birth and death). In Theravada Buddhism the meaning of *vimutti* seems different from its Sanskrit equivalent. The fifth *vimutti* mentioned above, *nissaraṇa-vimutti*, is close to the meaning of *nibbāna*, but it cannot be said to be equivalent to *nibbāna*. Later, *vimutti* was equated with *nibbāna* and got a meaning equivalent to Sanskrit *mokṣa*. This term *mokṣa* became one of the four parts of *puruṣārtha* (*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*) in Hinduism. This paper will describe *vimutti* and its kinds, and discuss how it became equated with *mokṣa*.

Dr Lalan Kumar Jha completed his M.A and M.Phil. in the Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Delhi. He studied for his Ph.D. on a Jawaharlal Nehru Scholarship for Doctoral Studies, spending two years in Kelaniya University, Sri Lanka. He is now an Assistant Professor in the Department of Pali, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara. He has presented more than thirty papers in national and international seminars or conferences, and has written three books: *Buddhism: A Humanistic Approach*; *The Vimuttimaggā: A Critical Study*; and *Man and the Moral Base*.

Anna King (Winchester University)

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*Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Recovery in Nepal: A Buddhist Case Study*

This paper grows out of a case study being carried out in Nepal, which investigates, documents, and evaluates the role and potential of religion in articulating, and achieving, the goals and purpose of justice and change. Though the Government focuses on the transition from a state pervaded by a single dominant religion to secularism, while international organisations see religion as too sensitive and complex an area for ‘outsider’ intervention, religion is not entirely sequestered to the private sphere; there are numerous international and national faith-based organisations, individuals and institutions in Nepal involved in peacebuilding. The paper will examine the diversity of Buddhism in Nepal, explore how peacebuilding operates at different levels of society, and problematise the idea that Buddhism

is inherently peaceful. In conclusion I will suggest areas for further research and offer recommendations about how Buddhist peacebuilding can be enhanced in the Nepal context.

Dr Anna S. King is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Winchester, and member of the Winchester Centre of Religions for Reconciliation and Peace (WCRRP). Her research and teaching interests include Peace and Conflict Studies, South Asian religious traditions, and subcontinental and global Islam. Anna is founder editor of Religions of South Asia (RoSA) published three times a year by Equinox (2007-), and from 1998 to 2013 she was convenor of the annual Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions.

Robert Leach (University of Zurich, Switzerland)

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*Orthodoxy, Traditionalism and the Five Knowledges*

In his *Tantravārttika* (on sūtra 1.3.4), the sixth or seventh century Mīmāṃsaka author Kumāṛila groups the Sāṃkhyas, Yogas, Pāñcarātras and Pāśupatas along with the Buddhists and Jains. Each of these traditions' texts contradict śruti, says Kumāṛila, and are not accepted by those who know the triple Veda. Many scholars have pointed to this passage as providing evidence for the fact that there was, in Kumāṛila's time, no sense of a shared orthodoxy among traditions which are now counted as Hindu. But from the time of the (third or fourth century?) composition of the Nārāyaṇīya section of the *Mahābhārata*, numerous works in Sanskrit also list Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Pāñcarātra and Pāśupata alongside the Veda, and assert these traditions' either partial or total compatibility with it. These works belong to several different genres of Sanskrit literature, including philosophical and legal commentaries, Purāṇas, Tantric scriptural works, stotra literature, and doxographical treatises. The paper will present an overview of the history of the fivefold grouping Veda, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Pāñcarātra and Pāśupata, focussing particularly on the different ways in which it was put to use by traditionalist authors within the exegetical systems of Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta.

Dr Robert Leach was awarded a PhD in Sanskrit by the University of Edinburgh in 2012 for a thesis entitled 'Textual Traditions and Religious Identities in the Pāñcarātra', supervised by Paul Dundas. From September 2012 to June 2013, he was Lecturer in Sanskrit at the University of Edinburgh. Since December 2012 he has been a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Zurich.

Eleanor Nesbitt (Warwick University)

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*'The Fool Quarrels about Flesh and Meat': Khalsa Sikh groups and vegetarianism*

The questions whether Sikhs are vegetarian and whether they should be vegetarian underlie UK media coverage of two recent disputes. Starting from these cases this paper explores past and present Sikh practice for answers to these questions. The relationship between diet and devotion hinges on whether the consumption of meat is compatible with identification as a religiously observant Sikh or, more specifically, as a Khalsa Sikh. The paper suggests the importance of the issue of vegetarianism/non-vegetarianism to a religious community which has at its heart *langar* (provision of a shared meal in the gurdwara). Discussion of vegetarianism vis-à-vis *langar* leads into an examination of Sikhs' sacred text and their Gurus' lives for evidence of dietary exhortation and practice. The issue of meat-eating or avoidance is then explored in the context of a religious diversity that is masked by any simple

division of Sikhs into Khalsa (initiated and religiously committed) on the one hand and non-Khalsa on the other. The dietary emphases of contemporary Khalsa groups and spiritual leaders are highlighted, and contextual factors in Sikhs' avoidance or consumption of meat are considered.

Eleanor Nesbitt is Emeritus Professor, University of Warwick. Much of her research has focused on religious socialisation and identity formation in Christian, Hindu, Sikh and 'mixed-faith' families. Her publications include: *Sikhism A Very Short Introduction* (2005); *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and Religious Approaches* (2004); *Interfaith Pilgrims* (2003); (with Kailash Puri) *Pool of Life; The Autobiography of a Punjabi Agony Aunt* (2013); and (with Gavin D'Costa, Mark Pryce, Nicola Slee and Ruth Shelton) *Making Nothing Happen: Five Poets Explore Faith and Spirituality* (2014).

Rupa Pillai (University of Oregon, USA)

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*A Village Puja in the City: Caribbean Hindus in New York*

For a month every summer, the devotees of a Caribbean Kalimai mandir in New York City prepare and observe karagam puja. This is an annual ritual of gratitude to the Mother, Maha Kali, a marginalized goddess within the Hindu tradition who helps her followers make sense of the emotional and social difficulties they endure as racialized minorities in the US. Besides demonstrating their devotion, this event celebrates the Kalimai tradition's story of migration, from a South Indian village tradition to a marginalized tradition in the Caribbean to its most recent manifestation in New York. Adapting to the sociocultural contexts encountered in its migration, this contested tradition strives to preserve its village character through the continuation of its rituals, attracting an ever-growing community of devotees from different classes and ethnicities. Using interviews and ethnographic research, I examine the realities of practising this village tradition in urban New York. Unable to simply transplant Kalimai worship outside the Caribbean, devotees of the Mother modify parts of the puja to operate within America while preserving other aspects to ensure the future of the tradition. Further, I consider how the migration of this tradition from India to the Caribbean and then US cultivates a transnational religious community of devotees, transcending the physical walls of the New York mandir.

Rupa Pillai is a doctoral student of cultural anthropology at the University of Oregon. She is interested in the intersection of religion, gender, race, and migration. Over the past four years she has conducted ethnographic fieldwork of Caribbean Hinduism as it is observed and practiced in the Indo-Caribbean enclave of Richmond Hill, Queens, New York. Before joining the doctoral program at the University of Oregon, Rupa completed her undergraduate training at the University of Texas at Austin and earned an M.A. in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago.

Catherine Robinson, (Bath Spa University)

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*One Hundred Years On: Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims on the Western Front*

In 2014, the world commemorates one hundred years since the start of the Great War, a date that also marks the centenary of the arrival of Indian soldiers on the Western Front. This paper investigates the part religion played in the recruitment and retention of the Indian Army by reflecting on the vexed concept of 'martial race', specifically whether and in what sense

religion was relevant to it. The paper continues by examining the particular religious challenges posed by deployment on the Western Front, including the treatment of sick and wounded, through a case study of the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, as a military hospital where the special arrangements made to treat casualties and fatalities have been extensively documented. In the context of an evaluation of imperial ideology, the legacy of ‘martial race’ is considered, chiefly in relation to the British Sikh community, some of whose members have appealed both to a martial heritage and to a tradition of service under British colours in making representations about the army today.

Catherine Robinson has been a lecturer at Bath Spa University for over twenty years where she now teaches on the Religions, Philosophies and Ethics programme. She is particularly interested in the interaction between ‘East’ and ‘West’ in the modern era, and has focussed her research on texts such as the Bhagavad-Gita and figures such as Edwin Arnold.

Valerie Roebuck (Manchester University)

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*Missing Cat: In Search of the Feline in Indian Traditions*

While Indian traditions of art and literature are noted for their loving depictions of animals of many kinds, there seems to be a scarcity or even a near-absence of cats; while general studies on the lore of the cat typically have little or nothing to say about South Asia. Yet *Felis catus* is present there, as in nearly all the inhabited parts of the world, and it seems to have been so for at least 2000 years. In this paper, which will be illustrated with slides, I propose to go in search of the Indian feline through the art and literature of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, and to make a first attempt to write the missing chapter on the place of the cat in South Asian traditions.

Valerie J. Roebuck, MA, PhD (Cantab) is an honorary research fellow of the University of Manchester, and a research associate of the Centre for the History of Religion in Asia, University of Cardiff. While her most recent publications have been on texts—most notably her translations of the Upaniṣads and the *Dhammapada*—she retains her love for the visual arts of India, in which she took her PhD, and to which she returns in her paper for this Symposium.

Catherine St-Hilaire (University of Milan, Italy)

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*A Journey to Punjab: ‘Here and There’, and Sikh Identity in Birmingham*

Identity, location and network are intertwined concepts that have always been difficult to define or observe in modern transnational study. How self-identification has become muddled in a world where individuals can shift their cultural, religious or geographical identity to their current location, is of interest. Sikhs, with modern conditions such as the reinforcement of the communicational network, are able to reinvent the concepts that influence their identity and behaviours in different localities. This paper shows how travelling to the homeland and back may engage a Sikh in new locational networks and play on one’s personal identification. In the meantime, those who are connected with Sikh values outside Punjab, the homeland, can feel various degrees of influence, either closer to their Sikh origin or to their British nationality, on their personal views of themselves, and this despite the growing network connections with Punjab in this modern age.

Catherine St-Hilaire is a Canadian student recently admitted to the new PhD program of Sociology and Methodology of Social Research at the Università degli Studi di Milano. She did her bachelor degree with Honours in Anthropology at the University of Concordia (Montreal, Canada), and then continued her studies at Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam (Netherlands) in Social and Cultural Anthropology. This abstract is based on her master's thesis, which is closely connected to her future project as a PhD candidate, this time exploring the Sikhs of Northern Italy.

Dhrubajyoti Sarkar (Kalyani University, West Bengal, India)      dhruba.sarkar@gmail.com

*Prophet in the Sin City: Revisiting Ramakrishna's Calcutta*

Most discussions on Ramakrishna's Calcutta, the city where he lived for nearly forty years, veer towards his relationship with the city dwellers. Sumit Sarkar's *Ramakrishna and the Calcutta of His Times* (1990) started a trend, now recognised in the index of the Udbodhan edition, which has a common entry for Calcutta and its people. While a city is primarily a human habitat, it is shaped by a set of interactions, not all of which are between human agencies. This paper looks at Ramakrishna's interactions with non-human agencies that constitute a large part of his understanding of Calcutta. Arguably Ramakrishna's Calcutta was a quintessentially colonial city, shaped and driven by many colonial agencies. However, his reactions to its many facets are not limited within the binary divide of city-country, innocence-experience. While showing the tension between the urban middle class and nostalgia for the rural innocence that they are deprived of by the constraints of colonial rule, this paper argues that Ramakrishna's responses do not allow such limitation. Finally, it is proposed that the relation between the urban vices that Ramakrishna seems anxious to cure his disciples of, and his reaching out to urban wonders, allows him to chart his eclectic path of re-appropriating the enchanted urban experience.

Dhrubajyoti Sarkar is an Assistant Professor of English at University of Kalyani, West Bengal, India. His doctoral dissertation at University of Hyderabad was on the construction of the Guru figure in early Bengali nationalism. His research areas are religious nationalism in India and religion-culture interface. Among other things, he teaches Victorian literature and culture and aesthetic philosophies from British and Indian traditions.

Asaf Sharabi and Hagar Shalev (University of Haifa Israel)

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*From a Ruler and a King to a Judge and a Healer: Assimilation of Pan-Hindu Tradition, Influence of Technological and Economic Development and the Different Effects on the Religious Experience of Khas Society*

Research literature about the Western Himalayas emphasizes the theistic control of local deities, using the concepts of 'little kingdom' and 'government by deity'. Local gods function as kings, sometimes wandering the kingdom. We shall indicate the beginning of a change in the perception of *devtā* in Khas society. Although the local *devtā* (Mahāsū) is still perceived as a ruler, his role as such remains largely symbolic. The main contemporary reference to him is as advisor and healer in times of distress, and as judge during times of disagreement. Local theistic conceptions adapt to political and economic changes as well as to influences from the pan-Hindu tradition. Theological and practical changes in the last 7-10 years can be detected:



(1) at the spatial level in the dispersion of the *devtā* and his control over space, in its social (caste-based) context; (2) at the level of personality, in the nature and behaviour of each of the Mahāsū brothers; (3) at the level of abstraction and concretization of divinity in relation to existing Pahāḍīc (mountain-local) perceptions; and (4) at the ritual level, associated with the range between purity and impurity in relation to the rituals (*pūjā*), the *devta*'s 'food' and the most important festival of Mahāsū called Jāgara.

Dr. Asaf Sharabi is on the staff of the Peres Academic Center, Rehovot, Israel. His Ph.D dissertation in social anthropology at Bar Ilan University, Israel (2010) dealt with the way in which religion is manifested and experienced in the current modern era. I examined this issue through the case of the 'return to the faith movement' (teshuvah movement) in Israel.

Hagar Shalev is an M.A. student in Asian Studies at the University of Haifa, Israel. Her main interest is in Indian studies in general and west Himalayan religions in particular.

Martin Wood (Bath Spa University)

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*Blessed food from Jalarām's kitchen: Narrative, continuity and service among Jalarām Bāpā devotees in London*

The hagiographies of the popular Gujarātī Hindu saint Jalarām Bāpā (1799-1879 C.E.) tell us that he established a charitable kitchen in 1820 to feed the holy, the hungry and the poor in the Virpur region of Gujarāt. They tell of the central belief that no matter how many people turned up, all would go away satisfied, and the stores would always remain full, even in times of severe drought and famine. Today, at the Jalaram Bapa Mandir in Greenford, London, belief in food *parchās* (blessings or miracles) and the tradition of social service (*sevā*) by providing blessed food (*prasādam*) are continued. Every day at 1 pm the mandir kitchen dispenses free meals to devotees from a diversity of backgrounds and, as in the hagiographies, the kitchen and store never run out, no matter how many turn up. Drawing on recent ethnographic research at the Greenford mandir, this paper will examine the continuing phenomena of *parchās* and the distribution of blessed food, and consider how the vernacular beliefs of the community underpin their commitment to ethical social action as well as enabling them to maintain their distinct religious identity through serving blessed food to the wider community, irrespective of social status or religious conviction.

Martin Wood received his PhD (Food, Identity and Authority in the Gujarati Hindu Diaspora) from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at University of Bristol (2009). He recently taught the study of Hinduism both at University of Bristol and SOAS, and currently lectures in the Study of Religions at Bath Spa University. His research interests lie in the exploration of the Jalarām Bāpā tradition in the U.K. examining the development and continuity of vernacular traditions and social ethics among Jalarām devotees in this context.