

ANNUAL WORK-IN-PROGRESS SEMINAR

Centre for South Asian Studies
School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh

2nd and 3rd May 2023, George Square Campus, Edinburgh
Link to register - [CSAS Work-in-Progress](#)

Abstracts

Panel 1 – Arts and Artistic Representation

Sounding Authenticity in Virtual Carnatic Music:

How a New Generation of Artists Repurposes the Classical

Shreya Ramnath, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University, Vienna
(Visiting PhD candidate at the School of Social and Political Science)

Carnatic music is seeing an explosion of virtual activity— in the form of experimentation, innovation both within the system and transcending genre boundaries, and transnational musical alliances. How do practitioners negotiate the new virtual platform alongside these divergences from the conventional? I argue that a new generation of artists locates authenticity less in faithfulness to the classical canon and conventions and more in values of self-reflection, self-discovery, originality, and a concern for social and political issues, a departure dramatic in a traditional artistic system that has consciously disavowed political affiliations. Drawing on 14 months of fieldwork, I demonstrate how these practitioners *repurpose, reconfigure and reflect* on Carnatic music in the virtual realm in ways that best align with their “modern”, cosmopolitan selves, reflecting how authenticity is both the experience of feeling congruent to one’s sense of true self and a quest for stability and identity amidst the frenzied forces of postmodernity. I demonstrate how what respondents refer to as their “authentic” identity is showcased and sounded in their explorations, and argue that this authenticity has two dimensions. First, it is reflected in personal comportment, sartorial choices, and an embracing of a certain confidence that is at odds with the humility mandated by the classical tradition. Second, authenticity is located and performed in and through these young artists’ music, which breaks free from performance and textual convention in its content. This content, which is socially and politically motivated and unmoored in religious texts or ideas, links back to how they view themselves – as a questioning, thinking, feeling generation with the tools—and responsibility—to challenge the status quo.

Vanguards of *'Aql* (Reason):

Painting, Power and the Politics of Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Mughal Workshop

Sukaina Husain, 3rd Year PhD candidate, History of Art, Edinburgh College of Art

In 1611, the Jahangiri court painter, Daulat (fl. late 16th-17th century) added a portrait of himself seated in front of the famed *nasta'liq* calligrapher, 'Abd al-Rahim *'Ambarin Qalam* (fl. late 16th-17th century) to a Mughal manuscript produced around a decade earlier during emperor Akbar's reign. In an album preface written in the same year, the elite Mughal calligrapher, Muhammad Hussain Kashmiri (d. 1611) exhorted the *'aql* (reason) of Mughal court painters such as Daulat, characterising them as vanguards who had, by dint of their perfect knowledge of their art, come to rival the power once wielded by the calligrapher and his *qalam* (pen) in the imperial Mughal workshop. A close analysis of the symbolic and conceptual language of the two practitioners' non-verbal and verbal statements illustrates that painter and calligrapher's respective images of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century imperial Mughal court workshop mark a historical rupture in the relationship between writing and painting in the Mughal workshop. If both Daulat's portrait and Muhammad Hussain's preface point to a change in the cultural-political structuring of the knowledge, power, and authority, then we must ask ourselves, what exactly changed in the Mughal workshop and how?

Aiming to answer the above question, this paper turns received art historical views about the relatively stable status of painting and painterly knowledges in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Mughal court on its head and identifies key historical-epistemological and cultural-political factors responsible for the above shift in the status of painting and painterly knowledges in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Mughal world. Challenging received views about this relatively "stable" period in the history of painting and painterly practice, this paper posits that the above shift hinged on a historical-epistemological shift in practitioners' conceptions of the nature and function of material objects produced by the painter and his knowledges, which in turn contributed to a cultural-political shift in the status and value of their knowledges outside, but more significantly, *inside* the Mughal workshop. Examining the painter's albeit unstable integration in the hegemonies structuring the relationship between knowledge, power, and authority inside and outside the Mughal workshop, this paper sets out new perspectives on the character of knowledge-production in the Akbar and Jahangir's imperial ateliers and suggests that the history of knowing, making and thinking in the sixteenth-century Mughal workshop was neither as linear or stable as art historians and historians have made it out to be so far.

Panel 2 – Caste, Religion, and Marginalisation

Caste and Development: Competing Visions and Tensions in Village Politics

Anisha George, PhD candidate, School of Social and Political Science

The unevenness of India's growth story is evident in its rural margins. A deepening agrarian crisis and inadequate non-farm sector pushes people out of villages, yet the insecurity of employment and existence in migration destinations reinforces the notion of the village as 'home,' which fuels (re)investment in the village and its resource politics. Such livelihood insecurity while cutting across social sections is nevertheless differentiated along caste, class, gender and age. Correspondingly, the articulations and aspirations for 'development' at the village level too are differential. Gram panchayats (village councils), despite poor financial devolution, have become pivotal gateways to resource flows in villages, both state and non-state. This spawns political competition in the village to gain control of such resources, which, in turn, enhances the resources drawn into the village as political leadership competes to demonstrate their capacity to lobby for development funds and execute public works. Constituents distinguish between political panels through their visions and distribution of costs and benefits. The questions of what development, for whom and at what/whose cost are mired in political contest, especially so in the underdeveloped and drought-prone Marathwada region in west India. It engenders oppositional counter play as well as public dissent and discontent. A critical examination of these contests reveals that beneath the universal aspiration for development lie partisan visions and claims over development. This partisanship is both political and communal, reflecting the structural cleavages mediating democratic politics.

Hindutva in the Mountains: how Hindu nationalism reaches the temples in Kullu, India

Ishita Mahajan, 3rd year PhD candidate, School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh

In the predominantly rural Kullu district in the North Indian hill-state of Himachal Pradesh, most villages have presiding deities who are viewed as rulers of their predefined territories. Managed by a temple committee, many of these deities are officially recognised as land-owning 'perennial minors' by the district administration. The deities speak through their mediums and move across their territory as chariots. They actively use their authority to govern their followers and influence their everyday lives. In my presentation, I aim to explore the nature of local Hindutva activists' interaction with the deities, the temple committee and the village community. Drawing from my fieldwork conducted in 2021-22, I will attempt to discuss how members of organisations affiliated with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana (ABISY) work towards bringing about "reforms" or transformations within the deity traditions and how their actions are received by the village community. In the state of Himachal Pradesh, where, as per the Census conducted in 2011, over 95% of the population is identified as Hindu, I aim to highlight the areas which receive the most attention under the Hindutva enterprise, and to what extent do the deity traditions feature in the larger aim of Hindu majoritarianism.

Keynote Lecture

The Enigmatic Pursuit of Social Justice

Prof. Meena Dhanda

At the start of India's journey as an independent republic, Dr B.R. Ambedkar warned that if 'we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life' we will put our 'political democracy in peril'. Seventy-three years later our pursuit of social justice remains enigmatic. Inequities abound - stubbornly persisting, magnified, intractable. A closer examination suggests the antithetical pull of the two parts of 'social justice': the social is partial and unruly, justice is impartial and orderly. Is this where the problem lies? Is the core of the social - of intimate norms governing relations between self and other - out of reach of impartial justice? Is every programme of social justice bound to fail due to overreach or underreach? Yet, from another perspective, the social is coded too by heteronormativity, androcentrism, white supremacy and caste patriarchy. But all these hierarchies rely on enforcement, on the use of violent means, including, state sanctioned permissions and prohibitions on transgressions. How then can the very instruments of justice that hold the conservative social together, become constructive tools in favour of the oppressed to fructify social justice? These enigmas of social justice will be examined using recent examples from India, of superexploitation of sanitation labour, the bulldozing of homes of the poor and the incarceration without trial of campaigners for social justice. A final question will be to ask: is the resurgence of Ambedkar's slogan: 'one man, one value', in the form of the recent demand for disclosure of the caste census, the beginning of an answer towards a feasible programme of social justice?

Meena Dhanda is Professor of Philosophy and Cultural Politics. She arrived in the UK from the Indian Punjab in 1987 with an award of a Commonwealth Scholarship for doctoral work in Philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford University. She has taught and researched in philosophy at Wolverhampton from 1992. She is currently engaged in doing empirically informed social, moral and political philosophy, with a focus on casteism as a kind of racism. She is internationally recognised as a leading academic in the development of diaspora Dalit studies. To understand injustices, prejudices and misrepresentations suffered by powerless groups, she pursues transdisciplinary studies, specifically connecting caste, class, gender and race. She brings Ambedkar into conversation with a diverse range of philosophers such as Fanon, Sartre and Wittgenstein. Meena has led research projects funded by The Leverhulme Trust, Equality and Human Rights Commission UK, and the European Commission. She has authored *The Negotiations of Personal Identity*, and edited *Reservations for Women*. She has co-edited special issues of journals on anti-caste thought, Dalits and Religion, Race and Racism in Scotland. She is currently co-editing the *Routledge Handbook of Punjab Studies* and writing *Caste: A Very short Introduction* for Oxford University Press.

Panel 3 – Identities and Narratives

Documents and identities: narratives of paid work of Afghan refugee women in Delhi, India

Kanak Rajadhyaksha, 3rd year PhD candidate, School of Social and Political Science

In this paper, I explore the role of identity documentation in the lives of Muslim Afghan refugee women in Delhi, India, in accessing paid work. The possession and non-possession of a variety of ID documentation, including the UNHCR issued Asylum Seeker Certificate and the Refugee Card, and government issued documentation such as the Aadhaar Card, is crucial in shaping the possibilities and actuality of paid work for Muslim Afghan refugee women. Through narratives of Muslim Afghan refugee women of the Hazara, Pashtun, and Tajik ethnicities, across three localities in Delhi with a substantial Afghan refugee population, I draw connections between the varied identities that Muslim Afghan refugee women constitute with the kinds of documentation that they possess and are able to procure, to offer an understanding of the constraints and opportunities, the hopes and desires, and the negotiations in paid work shaped by identity documentation.

What makes a good Brahmin girl? A Study of Intergenerational Narratives

Sambhavi Ganesh, 3rd year PhD candidate, School of Social and Political Science

In the context of increased access to the public sphere and its concomitant opportunities, how do Tamil Brahmin women perform their caste and gender identities? In answering this question, this presentation traces how girls from three consecutive generations have been raised in contemporary Tamil Brahmin families. My 10-month-long fieldwork follows highly mobile intergenerational families among middle-class Tamil Brahmins. In congruence with previous findings, each successive generation of Tamil Brahmin women is more educated and has greater access to employment and the public sphere. However, how my participants have encountered and responded to this process immensely complicates it. Daughters' higher education and employment choice have undoubtedly become inevitable in the households I accessed. However, they are also trained, primarily by the mothers, to follow gender-specific practices on an everyday and occasional basis. Further, performing well in higher education and getting prestigious employment is a part of this gendering – a complete reversal from the prestige associated with the lack of school access among Tamil Brahmin girls a century ago. However, this begs the question of what this reversal implies. Using in-depth interview narratives of three generations of Tamil Brahmin women within families (grandmother, mother, and daughter), I show the continuities and changes in the expectations of older women from daughters in their early life. Through this exercise, I hope to reframe women's access to the public sphere through the lens of caste-gender performance. Most importantly, I explore the grey areas between compliance and resistance of daughters - that one has to be a good daughter is always insisted upon, but what it means to be a good daughter is constantly redefined.