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Paper: Engendering Bhakti Networks in Kashmir and Tamil Nadu

Panel: “Beyond Familiar Boundaries: Collaborative Studies of Bhakti Across Limits of Language and Region” – Regional Bhakti Studies Network Preconference at the 45th Annual Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin

Abstract:

This Preconference is intended to bring together scholars specializing in different subregions of South Asia to focus upon and discuss how different aspects of sainthood compare and contrast. For my presentation, I am collaborating Karen Pechilis to examine how gender affected, and continues to affect, how female saints have been understood and represented differently than their male counterparts who have often been networked together through lineage and other institutional associations in consistent, recurring, familiar patterns.

The abstract for our collaborative project is as follows:

The image of male poet-saints traversing India to encounter one another in an historical meet-up has furnished the foundation of a network theory of *bhakti* and its generative decline and refashioning into nation, as promoted by nationalists and critically examined by scholars. This network imaginary is overwhelmingly male and, by the sixteenth century, Vaiṣṇava-focused. In relation to this narrative, female poet-saints who are identified with Śaivism and/or Sufism are doubly-marginalized. Challenging this marginalization, this RBSN collaboration explores the network of gendered discourse in *bhakti* by focusing on two female poet-saints, Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Lal Ded, to reveal gendered thematic connections across regional (Tamilnadu, Kashmir), linguistic (Tamil, Kashmiri) and temporal (ca. 550, ca. 1320-1392) distinctions.

The themes of our presentation are threefold: 1) Priority – what we can suggest about the poet-saint’s own priorities from her works and to what extent those are gendered; 2) Propriety – the contours of social views of gender as revealed in the ways in which these female saints are remembered by others, prominently including biographies/hagiographies of them; 3) Probing – the extent to which the poet-saints expanded Hinduism by engaging *bhakti* with religious streams now considered distinctive (Tantrism, Sufism).

As may be apparent, my own part of the project necessarily addresses additional complications regarding female poet-saints, as Lal Ded is revered as a Śaiva, Hindu *bhakti* saint by some, a Sufi Muslim saint by others, and a uniquely syncretic Kashmiri saint by others still. Moreover, Kashmir’s contested status as a territory currently divided between China, India, and Pakistan further complicated Lal Ded’s legacy, as she is deployed often in conjunction with other Sufi, Śaiva, and native Kashmiri saints as a means to bolster the reputation and authority of those other saints and support different nationalisms that invoke those figures, from mainstream Indian, Pakistani, and Kashmiri nationalisms to more virulent forms of Hindu Nationalism, Islamism, and militant Kashmiri separatism.