South Asian Studies Program
Short-term Workshop on Ritual, Culture, and the Environment in South Asia
April 15-17, 2010

For more than 3000 years India has been the home of elaborate rituals. They may be found in religious practice, family life, state formation, architecture, and interpersonal relations. In recent decades ritualists have been under pressure to accommodate to rapid social and economic changes, and new ritualistic behaviors have been discovered in diverse areas, including ecology and environmentalism, agriculture, industry, and politics. To further investigate these developments, the South Asian Studies Program will host a workshop on “Ritual, Culture, and the Environment in South Asia” from Thursday April 15 through Saturday April 17, 2010. The workshop, which is a one semester-hour short course, will explore forms of ritual in India that cross linguistic, regional, and religious boundaries, and exploit methods and theories from diverse disciplines.

During the 2½ day workshop, seven experts on India, including two UI faculty members, will explore how the study of ritual is relevant in contemporary India. All are exciting and responsive speakers who welcome students’ questions and opinions.

Undergraduates interested in Indian history, religion, culture, or environmental studies are particularly invited to participate, but students in any discipline and degree program are welcome. The workshop can be found on ISIS under 039:198: (section 002), “Topics in Asian Studies: Ritual, Culture, and the Environment in India.” Registration will remain open through April 14. To receive academic credit, registrants must attend all sessions, participate in discussions and submit a two-page reflection paper by April 23. Ample time will be given for discussion and student participation, and students will be able to interact with the speakers throughout the event. Funding for the workshop is from the US Department of Education and from International Programs.

All sessions, except for those scheduled for Saturday afternoon (106 GILH), will take place in the International Commons room 1117, located in the University Capitol Center (located in the Old Capitol Mall). They will commence at 4:00 pm on Thursday April 15, and will continue all day Friday and Saturday April 17 April 16 from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Light breakfast snacks will be served from 8:30-9:00 am on the 16th and 17th and periodically throughout the day. This workshop promises to be an intensive learning opportunity.

Speakers:

Paul Greenough – Professor of History and Community Behavioral Health, University of Iowa. Professor Greenough specializes in the history of modern India, and social and environmental history in India. He has conducted research in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and East Africa, and has published several books and many articles on the history of public health services in India, on the eradication of smallpox in Bangladesh, on the culture of museum space in India, and much more.

Frank Korom - Professor of Religion and Anthropology, Boston University. Professor Korom has conducted fieldwork in many places in India, as well as in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Trinidad, and Philadelphia, and is the author (or editor) of eight books and numerous articles. The most recent books are South Asian Folklore (2006) and A Village of Painters (2006). An earlier book, Hosay Trinidad (2002), won the Premio Pitre international book award in 2002.
Ann Grodzins Gold - Professor of Religion and Anthropology, Syracuse University. Professor Gold has spent many years conducting fieldwork in Rajasthan, and is the author (or co-author) of five books and many articles. Among her books are *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan* (2002, with Bhoju Ram Gujar) and *Sacred Landscapes and Cultural Politics: Planting a Tree* (2001, co-edited with Philip L. Arnold).

David Haberman – Professor of Religious Studies, Indiana University. Professor Haberman has spent many years researching various aspects of pilgrimage, ritual performance, the natural world and environmentalism in north India, particularly in Vrindavan and Varanasi, and is the author of five books and many articles. His most recent book is *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamunā River in North India* (2006). An earlier book, *Journey Through the Twelve Forests: An Encounter with Krishna* (1994) won the American Academy of Religion’s Award for Excellence. He is nearing completion of a major book on tree shrines in Varanasi.

Anup Kumar – Assistant Professor of Journalism, Cleveland State University. Professor Kumar was raised in Dehradu, in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, where he was a journalist. He has conducted research into religious and political ritual throughout the state. He completed his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Iowa in June 2008: *The Uttarakhand Movement: Press and social movement interaction*. This will be published shortly in book form (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan 2011).

William Sax - Professor of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg. Professor Sax has spent many years conducting social science and anthropological research in the central Himalayas and has written four major books and numerous articles. His most recent books are *God of Justice: Ritual Healing in the Central Himalayas* (2009) and *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pāṇḍav Līlā* (2002).

Frederick M. Smith – Professor of Sanskrit and Classical Indian Religions, University of Iowa. Professor Smith has lived in India for more than fifteen years and has specialized in the history of ancient Indian ritual performance and in the phenomenon of deity and spirit possession in India and elsewhere. He has translated a good deal of material from Vedic sources and from premodern Indian devotional philosophy and practice. He has published two major books, most recently the *Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in Indian literature and Civilization* (2006), and is nearly finished with an annotated translation with introduction to the Āśvamedhika parvan of the *Mahābhārata* (Univ. of Chicago Press 2011).
Paper titles:

**Ann Grodzins Gold**  Sacred Groves Revisited

**Paul Greenough**  Funerary Ritual and the Indian House Crow: Will a Long Trajectory Come to a Full Stop?

**David Haberman**  
1) Ritual Action & Environmental Activism: Loving Service for the Yamuna Devi  
2) Faces on the Trees: Neem Tree Worship in Banaras

**Frank Korom**  
1) Civil Ritual, NGOs, and Rural Mobilization in Medinipur District, West Bengal  
2) The Green Agenda of Tibetan Exiles

**Anup Kumar**  Culture of Protest in the *Dhandaks* and the *Jan Andolan* for Uttarakhand

**William Sax**  
1) A Non-Modern Healing Practice  
2) Religion, Possession, and the “hysteresis effect”: a case study from India

**Frederick M. Smith**  A Brief History of Indian Religious Ritual and Resource Consumption: Was there an Environmental Ethic?

Chief discussant: **Scott Schnell** (University of Iowa)

**Schedule of events:**

**Thursday April 15, 2010**

3:00-4:00pm  Registration

4:00-5:30pm  David Haberman: “Ritual Action & Environmental Activism: Loving Service for the Yamuna Devi”

**Friday April 16, 2010**

8:30-9:00  Tea & light breakfast

9:00-9:30  Frederick M. Smith: Welcome and Introduction

9:30-10:45  William Sax: “A Non-Modern Healing Practice”

10:45-11:00  Coffee break

11:00-12:15  Frank Korom: “Civil Ritual, NGOs, and Rural Mobilization in Medinipur District, West Bengal

12:15-2:00  Lunch break

2:00-3:15  Ann Grodzins Gold: “Sacred Groves Revisited”

3:15-3:30  Coffee break

3:30-4:45  Paul Greenough: “Funerary Ritual and the Indian House Crow: Will a Long Trajectory Come to a Full Stop?”

4:45-5:00  Final group discussion for the day
Saturday April 17, 2010

8:30-9:00  Tea & light breakfast
9:00-10:15  Frederick M. Smith: Welcome and talk: “A Brief History of Indian Religious Ritual and Resource Consumption: Was there an Environmental Ethic?”
10:15-10:30  Coffee break
10:30-11:30  Frank Korom: “Political ritual and the environment in the Tibetan diaspora.”
11:30-12:30  David Haberman: “Faces on the Trees: Neem Tree Worship in Banaras”
12:30-2:00  Lunch break
2:00-3:15  Anup Kumar: “Culture of Protest in the Dhandaks and the Jan Andolan for Uttarakhand”
3:15-3:30  Coffee break
3:30-4:45  William Sax: “Religion, Possession, and the “hysteresis effect”: a case study from India”
4:45-5:00  Concluding discussion

Paper abstracts:

Paul Greenough (University of Iowa)
Funerary Ritual and the Indian House Crow: Will a Long Trajectory Come to a Full Stop?
For two-thousand years the Indian house crow has been revered as a dynamic messenger between the living and the dead and plays a crucial role in Hindu funerary rituals, as laid out in the Garuda Purana. It also has a peculiar symbolic position in Indian art as an inquisitor figure and as a ubiquitous witness to human folly. New developments in Indian urban life, such as an explosion of cellular communication towers, make the house crow’s survival less certain and have begun to limit its numbers and distribution—this even as the house crow launches itself on a diasporic career in East Africa and Southeast Asia. This paper will review the recent history of a ubiquitous Indian species that plays many roles and that, like cows, cobras and monkeys, carries an unusually heavy load of meaning.

Ann Grodzins Gold (Syracuse University)
Sacred Groves Revisited
In diverse regions of India exist thousands of mostly small forested areas surrounding built shrines, or understood as spaces inhabited by gods or spirits. Such areas are commonly referred to in English as "sacred groves." I examine some of the broader debates surrounding sacred groves, and then turn to particular forested shrines in rural Rajasthan. These spaces harbor complex worlds of meaning, where greenery is integral to pilgrimage practices focused on everyday devotion and a quest for extraordinary healing miracles. Drawing on recently published findings based on 2003 fieldwork, I update these with additional observations from later visits. These include a local government forestry agent who seeks to protect a new tree plantation with the power of a revered goddess.

David Haberman (Indiana University)
1) "Religious Worship and Environmental Activism: Loving Service for Yamuna Devi"
The emerging field of Religion and Ecology examines the relationships between religious worldviews and concomitant human attitudes and behavior toward the nonhuman world. The Yamuna River of northern India has been celebrated as an aquatic form of divinity for thousands of years. Today, however, this sacred river is severely polluted. After considering both the religious perspectives long associated with the river and its current environmental condition, this
presentation will explore the responses that are emerging in reaction to river pollution in the religious communities that worship the Yamuna as a goddess, and introduce the audience to Indian river environmentalism, a form of activism that in many ways is quite different from its western counterpart. A major focus of the presentation will be an examination of the role of religious worship in efforts to protect and restore the Yamuna River.

2) "Faces on the Trees: Neem Tree Worship in Banaras"
Consideration of tree worship was once central to theories of religion, which tended to view this practice as a primitive form of anthropomorphic animism that has no place in a civilized modern world. How might we regard tree worship once it is liberated from the cultural evolutionary views of the nineteenth century? Neem trees have long been associated with the goddess Shitala in Hindu religious culture. This presentation examines the worship of individual neem trees in northern India, which in some cases involves clothing the tree and attaching a human-like facemask to it. Ethnographic evidence suggests that this remarkable form of anthropomorphic activity can be best understood as an intentional strategy for establishing more intimate relationships with the nonhuman world. Although it is not the explicit goal of most tree worshipers in India, this practice may serve as a possible resource for the preservation of trees.

Frank Korom (Boston University)
1) "Civil Ritual, NGOs, and Rural Mobilization in Medinipur District, West Bengal"
This presentation focuses on outside interventions in the affairs of rural peasants in an agricultural district of West Bengal, asking to what degree schemes for the dissemination of information about environmental protection and health awareness development are efficacious. The focus is on a caste of itinerant scroll painters/singers called Patuas, who have been recruited in recent decades to compose songs and narrative scrolls to teach villagers about a variety of ecological and social issues. The conclusion assesses the relative success or failure of such schemes.

Frank Korom (Boston University)
2) "The Green Agenda of Tibetan Exiles"
Tibetans living in the diaspora have taken it upon themselves to present Buddhism and Tibetan culture writ large as eco-friendly. The presentation explores the question of the extent to which this project was a self-realized one and to what extent it was implemented by outside funding agencies that were attempting to advocate a green Tibetan image in the global circuit. The conclusion ponders whether or not foreign interventions benefit the target community or simply propagate larger agendas that are enmeshed in new transnational discourses and emerging global alliances.

Anup Kumar (Cleveland State University)
Culture of Protest in the Dhandaks and the Jan Andolan for Uttarakhand
Why, when and how subaltern classes claim the public space, albeit temporarily, to collectively voice their protest against feudal oppression and growing encroachment on day-to-day lives of caste, religious and tribal communities by state apparatuses is a complex phenomenon. The complexity comes from the fact that it simultaneously includes defiance and submissiveness to authority and the prevailing social and the political structure. The work of the subaltern historians has helped us understand better the culture of protest of subaltern classes in traditional communities in India. They have argued that the “mentality of subalternity” shapes culture of protest, which simultaneously constitutes both defiance and submissiveness. In this paper, I will focus on the tradition of dhandak (traditional peasant protest) to explain how culture of protest works in contemporary Uttarakhand, a state in northwestern India.

In the feudal past, in dhandaks, the protestors claimed the public space in open fields, made speeches and sang songs of defiance, and demanded that the Rajah (the King) or someone from
the royal family show up and listen to their grievances. The people in a dhandacl defy the state, but at the same time, they are submissive to the divine authority of the Rajah. The Rajah is bolanda badri (voice of god on the Earth) and is supposed to have divine authority to rule, his actions are inherently just and he treats the people like his children. Thus, the people through holding of a dhandacl expressed their unhappiness with the misdeeds of his officials, and brought it to the Rajah’s notice. The assumption is that the Rajah does not know about the misdeeds of his officials. I will explain the culture of protest in colonial Uttarakhand by using the Tilari dhandacl (1929-30) in the subcultural region of Rawain, in Garhwal, as an historical exemplar. The Tilari dhandacl is a significant constituent of collective memory of the people in Garhwal and Kumaon. Following this, I will discuss how the dhandacl helps us in understanding the jan andolan (popular democratic mobilization) for Uttarakhand, which I suggest constituted both defiance and submissiveness to the state, making it different from many other separatist movements in India. I will also draw some conclusions as to how it helps in understanding contemporary jan andolans.

William Sax (University of Heidelberg)

1) A Non-Modern Healing Practice

Abstract: The practice of a family of healers in Malappuram district, Kerala, consists of a mix of “modern” and “non-modern” elements. They exorcize afflicting beings, but also prescribe modern medicines; their home practice resembles in some ways a medical clinic, in other ways a Hindu temple; they use internet advertising and participate in a complex, modern system of referrals among medical doctors, ayurvedic physicians, and astrologers. Are they “non-modern,” “modernizing,” “hybrid,” or something else, and why does this question matter? In this article, we briefly summarize modernization theory, its critics and its importance, describe and analyze the healers in light of this discussion, and conclude that theirs is a hybrid, modernizing practice. Finally, we argue that such hybridity is typical of contemporary, globalized medicine of all kinds.

2) Religion, Possession, and the “hysteresis effect”: a case study from India

What happens when people from one region of social space find themselves in another region, where their own embodied practices no longer fit; where they are perhaps thought to be inappropriate, vulgar, or snobbish? In this essay, I employ Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "hysteresis" to discuss this question in relation to religious possession. The case study is from Garhwal, an overwhelmingly Hindu region where Muslims make up only a tiny part of the population that, until very recently, participated in Hindu ritual practices involving possession. In recent years, itinerant Muslim preachers have exhorted this group to give up its Hindu practices, especially possession. The paper examines what happened when this group was afflicted by its ancestral deities and so faced a difficult choice: to propitiate the deities and relieve the affliction, or to follow the advice of their own religious teachers and affirm their orthodoxy.

Frederick M. Smith (University of Iowa)

A Brief History of Indian Religious Ritual and Resource Consumption: Was there an Environmental Ethic?

Practically without exception ritual performance requires the consumption of resources. Of course, ritual can be performed with no external expenses or resource utilization at all. An example is prayer. But most ritual, especially religious ritual, is meant to be observed, is participatory, and involves resource utilization. I will discuss five examples drawn from historical sources, including the Vedic ritual texts and the great Indian epic called the Mahābhārata, and from modern ritual performances in India. In the process, I will examine the relationship between contested ethical standards and expenditure, and inquire into the question of whether religious performance was at all concerned with environmental ethics in classical and modern periods. I will first inquire into the prescribed expenses in Vedic ritual and the symbolic values attached to them. I will do this by examining a brief late first millennium CE text on monetary values to be
used in the remuneration of Vedic ritual priests. Then I will briefly compare what we know of the resource ideology and resource consumption in the famous (if mythical) horse sacrifice performed by the victorious king Yudhiṣṭhira in the Mahābhārata with the culturally developed ethics of generosity and hospitality manifested by a poor but proud and ritualistically exacting family that lived off the leavings of grain from harvested fields. Then I will briefly examine two rituals performed simultaneously in India in 2007, a Vedic soma sacrifice and a Hindu temple consecration, inquiring into the resources utilized in both. Finally, I will ask the distinctly modern question of how all of these rituals exert pressure on the environment, and revisit the question asked by the Indian environmental writer Ramachandra Guha: “How much should a person consume?”