ENDURING STEREOTYPES ABOUT ASIA

All Indian Art Is Religious

By Vidya Dehejia

As you glance through the pages of a book on the art of India, or walk through a museum display of Indian art, you will be struck by the fact that the imagery seems overwhelmingly sacred in character. Who has not at one time or another seen a representation of a Hindu temple, a print of a meditating image of the Buddha, or a photograph of Shiva Natarāja as the cosmic god of dance?

Whether in the medium of stone, bronze, or clay, images of gods and goddesses, often multi-armed and occasionally multi-headed, dominate the scene. And setting aside Islamic monuments, all other architectural structures are sacred. Hindu and Jain temples exist in vast numbers, while Buddhist monastic establishments are abundant. It is not surprising that the notion is widely held that all Indian art is religious. The notion, however, is but a half-truth.

Let us first examine the part of the belief that is true. All monuments that have come down to us as the work of early Indian architects are indeed sacred in character. From the first century B.C. onward, we find Buddhist monastic centers which focus around a large *stupa* or relic mound containing the relics of the Buddha himself or of his disciples. Adjuncts of such monasteries include assembly halls as well as monastic residences comprising cells for monks arranged around a courtyard. Such monastic centers were constructed at various prominent locations and were also cut into the hills and valleys of western India, resulting in large numbers of "cave" monasteries. We find no evidence of any buildings of a secular nature that surely must have existed in the vicinity of these Buddhist sacred structures. From the fifth century A.D. onward, architects built stone Hindu temples across the length and breadth of India. Initially, these were relatively modest in size and consisted of a shrine preceded by a porch or hall. Gradually, the halls increased in size and number, and the entire temple structure grew to grandiose proportions, resulting in shrine towers reaching over 200 feet high. Here, too, none of the secular architecture that must have stood in the vicinity of these sacred shrines is

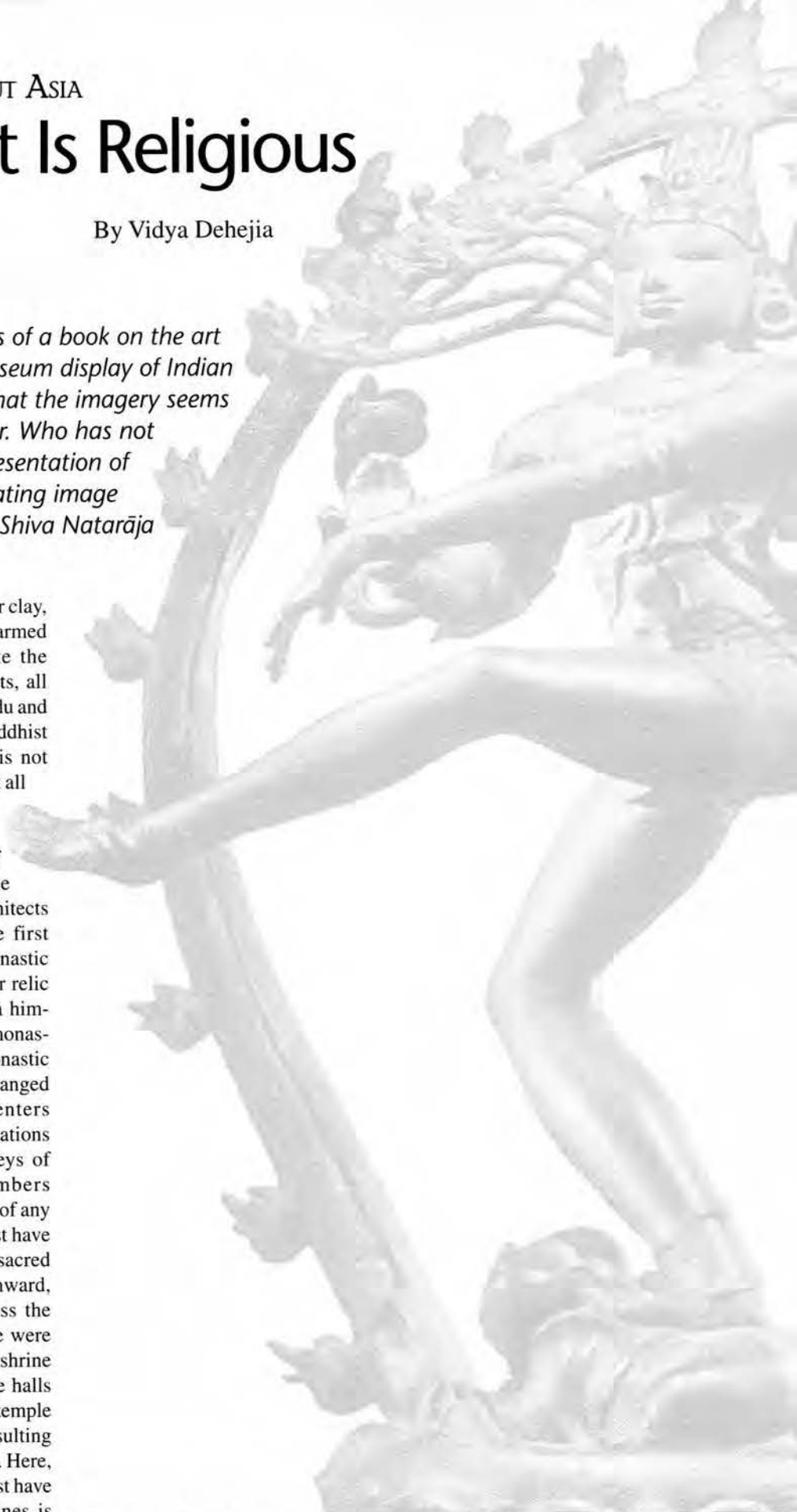

Illustration based on the tenth century A.D. copper sculpture, Shiva as Natarāja. Victoria and Albert Museum

THE TANJORE TEMPLE WITH SURROUNDING MOAT.
"THIS MONUMENTAL GRANITE TEMPLE REACHES A HEIGHT OF 212 FEET, AND ITS WALLS ARE COVERED WITH GREATER THAN LIFE-SIZED CARVINGS OF THE GODS AND GODDESSES."

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evident. In a sense, then, it seems correct to emphasize the sacred nature of all the ancient art that has come down to us.

But this is where we need to insert a caveat. "All the art that has come down to us" is art that was consolidated in the medium of solid, long-lasting stone. This was either the immovable rock of a mountainside or structures built by piling large, solid blocks of stone one upon the other. For reasons not clear to us, it was the Buddhists who first adopted stone construction, while the Hindus followed suit 500 years later. But what of building with less permanent materials? If we consider the smaller towns of India, or indeed the many small towns of middle America, we would find that even today, stone is not the standard medium of construction for homes, shops, and the like. On the other hand, the town's sacred center, be it temple or church, is likely to be built of stone. An archaeologist of the future, finding only the stone monuments standing above ground, might think that these American towns too believed only in sacred art!

In ancient India, however, this entire process was carried one giant step further. The Chandella monarchs, kings Yasovarman and Dhanga, were responsible for erecting the magnificent Lakshmana and Vishvanatha temples at Khajuraho. These elegant stone temples consist of a series of halls that culminate in the sweeping curve of the shrine tower, and the temple walls are decorated with sculpted stone images and carved designs. We might well imagine that the monarchs would have built for themselves an equally splendid stone palace as a testimony to their earthly grandeur. But this was not the case. In fact, the site of Khajuraho provides an interesting testing ground for this scenario. As the capital of the Chandella rulers of central India between the 9th and 13th centuries, the site once housed a large group of temples along the shores of an artificial lake; today some twenty-five temples stand intact while ruins of many more may be traced. But there is not a trace of the royal center. That it existed and that it was grand is quite certain; literary references in Chandella plays speak of musical performances on the palace grounds. Grand as it may have been, it would seem that the royal center was built of brick and wood; its decoration must have consisted of wood and clay sculptures and wall paintings. All of these have perished in the hot and humid climate of India; the stone temples alone have survived.

A parallel scenario is presented by the Chola capital of Tanjore. The famous Tanjore temple, often referred to as the Great temple, the Brihadesvara, stands on an elevated site. This monumental granite temple reaches a height of 212 feet, and its walls are covered with greater than life-sized carvings of the gods and goddesses. Two walls, each with a grand gateway giving access, enclose the temple, and a broad moat surrounds the entire complex (*photo to left*). The Chola emperor Rajaraja, or "king of kings," constructed the temple in the early years of the 11th century, after having consolidated his power across all of south India and having annexed Sri Lanka as a province of his empire. His title, "king of kings," speaks volumes of the pride in his achievement, and he constructed the temple to proclaim his victory and glory. But did he build only a stone temple and not an equally grand palace? He did indeed build himself a palace which he located immediately beside the temple, but the palace was built of brick, and today it is nonexistent. If one follows the moat around the temple, one would see that it encloses a large area of what seems to be fallow ground; this area once housed the brick palace of Rajaraja.

While excavations have not been undertaken at Tanjore, a series of trenches have been sunk at the site of Gangaikonda-cholapuram, capital of Rajaraja's son Rajendra. Here, too, Rajendra's stone temple stands proudly, with its tower reaching skyward, while nothing remains of his palace. The excavations have revealed foundations of the brick palace; the only stone at the palace site consists of granite bases intended to provide support for wooden pillars. A poet at the Chola court has left us this description of the grandeur of the royal area of Gangaikonda-cholapuram.

> *Palace entrance, mansions, avenues,*
> *temples, pavilions, balconies,*
> *ornamental gateways,*
> *windows, verandahs, upper stories,*
> *dancing halls and platforms,*
> *were filled with palace women,*
> *with crowds of people*
> *so that the very landscape around*
> *was made invisible to the eye*[1]

THE SVARGA BRAHMA TEMPLE.
"AS WE CONSIDER THE DISTRIBUTION OF IMAGES ON THE TEMPLE WALL, WE REALIZE THAT THERE ARE THREE IMAGES OF THE GODS AND FIVE AMOROUS COUPLES."

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But all this was of brick and wood construction and has not stood the test of time. It requires quite a feat of imagination to conjure up the ancient glory of the palace from the rudimentary character of the excavated remains.

This juxtaposition of brick and stone architecture, and the selective use of stone, tells us a great deal about the ancient Indian attitude towards the sacred and secular. However magnificently a palace stood, the kings were content to treat it as a relatively ephemeral structure that could be constructed of perishable material. But the temple, as the house of the gods, was designed to last for future generations; it was built of long-lasting stone and adorned with stone sculpted images and stone narrative reliefs.

It is correct, then, to state that all the ancient pre-Islamic art that has come down to us in the medium of stone is indeed sacred in nature. Monuments were dedicated to the Hindu, Buddhist or Jain faiths, and the sculptures that decorated them were created specifically to adorn these sacred structures. But does that necessarily imply that all the sculpture and painting decorating a sacred structure is religious in character? We shall see that it is not. And herein lies another half-truth about the religious nature of Indian art.

The walls of the temples at Alampur in the Andhra region of southern India are instructive in this context. (I have intentionally avoided focusing this discussion on the Khajuraho temples in central India or the Orissan temples, since both these are famed for their erotic, secular imagery.) The rear wall of the Svarga Brahma temple (*photo above*) has three framed niches, each of which houses an image of a deity. The large central recessed niche displays an image of Vishnu as Trivikrama, a gigantic form he assumed in his fifth incarnation. The smaller niches to the left and right contain smaller images of Vishnu. Sacred imagery is what one would expect on the walls of a temple which is, after all, a sacred structure. But what about the images that flank these niches? We see five sets of amorous couples who are clearly not sacred in character. As we consider the distribution of images on this temple wall, we realize that there are three images of the gods and five amorous couples. Why do images of sensuous females adorn Buddhist stupas and Hindu and Jain temples? How do we explain gods sharing temple walls with embracing couples? Why this extraordinary intermingling of sacred and secular?

Stella Kramrisch's inspired words in her 1954 book on Indian art are worth repeating here. "The art of India is neither religious nor secular," she wrote, "for the consistent fabric of Indian life was never rent by the Western dichotomy of religious belief and worldly practice."[2] Since Kramrisch did not elaborate, we need to seek further explanations here. In ancient India, the goals in life were four-fold: *dharma* or righteousness; *artha* or wealth, which was obtained by the pursuit of a profession; *kama* or love, both familial and sexual, which was essential for happy living; and *moksha* or spiritual salvation. It was not a question of following one or the other; rather, every individual was asked to strive after all four. Even one who wished to seek only salvation was apprised of his or her duty to seek the other three goals before embarking on the quest for salvation. A holistic approach to life was recommended, and it is in this context that we may start to understand the figural imagery on temple walls. While a temple may be intended primarily to help individuals towards the final goal of salvation, images depicting the other three goals of life had a legitimate place on the structure. Images

suggestive of the joy of love, or those depicting various professions, had as much right to be portrayed on a temple as images of deities. We should remember that those aiming for *vanaprastha*, or the life of a forest renunciant, were required to experience first the *brahmacharya* phase of student life, and then the *grahastha* stage of the married householder before renouncing these in later life. It is in this context that we may best understand the varied nature of the imagery found on temple walls.

And yet, there is surely more to it than this. After all, images of sensuous women and of couples occur very prominently on walls of temples and monastic Buddhist chapels. And the emphasis on rounded breasts, narrow waists, and broad hips is very pronounced. A second major explanation for such imagery lies in the belief that these were auspicious figures that brought fortune to a monument. The roots of this idea lay in the great significance given to the concept of fertility. Women and the couple were both clearly associated with fertility which, in turn, implied growth, abundance, and prosperity. This set of associations led to women and the couple becoming emblems of the auspicious. It was believed that in some magical manner, women and couples transferred their auspiciousness to the monument on which they were placed. If it was a Buddhist chapel, the monastic establishment would be blessed with good fortune; if it was a temple, that shrine would prosper; if it was the palace wall, the monarch would thrive. When artists were given specific religious or mythological themes to carve, they followed instructions; when left to themselves to complete the decoration of a wall, a pillar, a verandah, they inserted imagery that they knew to be of auspicious significance. Women and couples were high on this list, which included a third motif—lush, overflowing foliage which was an obvious emblem of fertility.

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Thus we find there was never a sharp distinction in India between the sacred and secular. One may contrast the solemn orchestrated atmosphere of a Christian church where people speak in hushed tones with the casual milieu of a Hindu temple where visitors and devotees chat casually while children run around unrestrained. A Hindu temple is a place for the adoration of the divine, but it is also a place for community gatherings where solemnity is combined with gaiety. A Sanskrit poem of some 120 verses, written around the year 1150, describes the mixed ambiance, pious yet light-hearted, that prevailed in a Jain temple.[3]

There in that temple made of dark stone, lovely women . . . smiled upon seeing the female bracket figures and felt fear at the sight of the lions adorning the thrones of the main images; they were wearied by the crush of worshippers and felt a tingle of pleasure as they brushed against the bodies of their husbands; they danced to the sound of the drums and all in all were a delight to the young gallants who watched them. (verse 68)

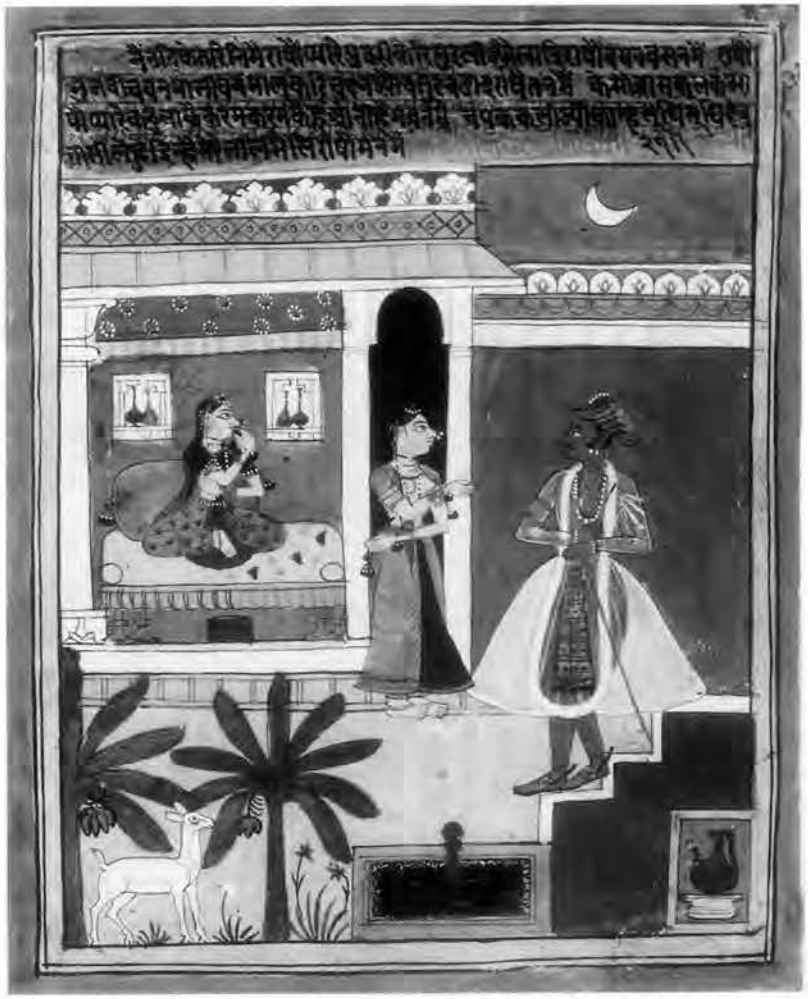
There in that temple, on festival days, when the crowd blocked their way, the cries of the elderly made everyone feel compassion for them as they implored, "Brother! Take me up front and give me a glimpse of the lotus face of Lord Pārśvanātha, who grants all wishes." (verse 107)

There the hall of paintings single-handedly awakened astonishment in the mind of every visitor: It amazed the children with pictures of monsters; the traveling merchants with pictures of elephants, monkeys, camels, and conveyances; the faithful with pictures of the exploits of the gods; the wives of kings with depictions of the harems of famous queens of old; the dancers and actors with pictures of dances and dramas; and the heroes with depictions of the cosmic battles between the gods and the demons. (verse 110)

There in that temple, the statue of a lady who struggled to hold fast to her girdle as a monkey untied its knot made young gallants feel desire and confirmed the steadfast in their rejection of sensual delights; it disgusted the pious and made old ladies feel embarrassed; while it made young men laugh and young girls wonder. (verse 112)

To provide a further example of the manner in which the sacred and secular intermingle in the art of India, I turn to the miniature paintings produced for the monarchs and aristocrats of the Rajput courts of northern India between the 17th and 19th centuries. While temples were seen, entered, and admired by masses of people, miniature paintings were intended for a restricted audience who savored them in luxurious surroundings. During this period, god Krishna had captured the imagination of the devout. The stories surrounding his many feats, as a child and a youth, and his great love for beautiful Rādhā are told in manuscripts of the *Bhāgavata Purāna* or "Ancient Tale of the Lord." God Krishna, described as the dark lord, is recognized in paintings by his deep blue color; even those unfamiliar with Indian art will spot Krishna by his dark hue.

"SINCE KRISHNA WAS THE DIVINE LOVER *PAR EXCELLENCE*, THE PAINTERS SEEM TO HAVE FELT IT APPROPRIATE TO USE HIS FIGURE TO ILLUSTRATE A SECULAR LOVE POEM DEALING WITH HEROES (*NĀYAKAS*) AND HEROINES (*NĀYIKĀS*)."



1. The deceitful hero from chapter 2 of the *Rasikapriya* (Connoisseurs' Delights) of Keshavadasa. ca. 1640. Mewar. 1991.91. Courtesy of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

In addition to the sacred texts, artists also illustrated secular works dealing with the theme of love, like the *Rasikapriya*, the *Sat Sai*, and the *Barahmāsa*. In several paintings of these secular texts, the hero is painted blue and often given the yellow robe and peacock plume or crown associated with Krishna (Illustration 1). This conflation of a human hero or *nāyaka* with divine Krishna is seen routinely in the paintings produced in the Rajput courts. But the presence of a blue image in the miniatures was not intended to signal to the viewers that the text was sacred in character. In fact, several such secular paintings featuring Krishna carry verses from their secular texts immediately above the illustration, clarifying their content. The artist just did not consider it strange to use Krishna as the archetypal hero. Since Krishna was the divine lover *par excellence*, the painters seem to have felt it appropriate to use his figure to illustrate a secular love poem dealing with heroes (*nāyakas*) and heroines (*nāyikās*). Admittedly, this would never have happened in a Christian context, but then the boundaries between sacred and secular were never sharply drawn in India.

It is intriguing to note that when we turn to folk religion and art, we find that artists take liberties with sacred iconography. In the Bastar tribal region of central India, for instance, figures of deities are extremely difficult to identify with any degree of certainty. Artists produce images according to visions received in dreams, and their dream visions are not consistent from one year to the next. Apart from an occasional figure of major importance, such as the goddess Danteshvari who always rides upon an elephant, there is no set iconography. Images of Budhimātā or Maulimātā are depicted holding different objects depending upon the artist who produced the image. The only way to identify most deities is to ask the artist the identity of the figure produced. To a degree, images are used interchangeably, so that bronzes may often be identified only as "standing goddess" or "two goddesses."

Other tribal groups like the Kondh of Orissa produce "deities," but they also create bronzes that include a range of animals and genre pieces depicting figures relaxing on beds or farmers ploughing with oxen. This latter group does not seem to have held sacred significance. Several are given as part of a bride's dowry and are spoken of by their owners as "valuable bronzes" — a small bronze costs as much as 22 lbs. of rice. The notion that all Indian art is religious is so strongly ingrained that it has taken many years to concede that certain categories of Kondh bronzes may, in fact, be of secular rather than sacred import. As we have seen, however, the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular is irrelevant in India; the two are inextricably linked, both in socio-religious practice and in India's art. ■

NOTES

1. Vidya Dehejia, *Art of the Imperial Cholas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 79.
2. Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of India Through the Ages* (London: Phaidon Press, 1954), 10.
3. Phyllis Granoff, "Halāyudha's Prism: The Experience of Religion in Medieval Hymns and Stories," in *Gods, Guardians, and Lovers. Temple Sculptures from North India A.D. 700-1200* ed. Vishakha N. Desai and Darielle Mason (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1993), 89-90.

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Cultural Memory and Postmodernism:

Traditional historical approaches to the study of Asia, or to parts of Asia, have become increasingly problematical.[1] To the long-standing questions that all Asianists face—How can I bring to life what are often for students quite alien cultural forms?—has been added a cluster of new ones. How can I help students begin to understand the constructed nature of all knowledge, including that of Asia? How can I get the important but often abstruse matters of power, gender, and class into the already congested introductory syllabus? Can I make the important and contemporary, but dense and self-referential, postmodern work in my scholarly field broadly accessible to undergraduates? Recent experience in teaching introductory survey courses on Asian religion begins to provide possible answers to these questions. The courses are "The Religious Life of India" and "The Islamic Religious Tradition," both 200-level courses, fourteen weeks in length, that assume no background in the study of Asia or in the study of religion.[2] Enrollment consists chiefly of sophomores, though all classes are usually represented. Since fellow Asianists share my concerns for making Asian cultural forms intelligible to undergraduates and perhaps also for infusing postmodern scholarship into the curriculum, analysis of that experience may be useful to others.

"A Buddhist meditation teacher once put the simple point elegantly: 'What are we if not our memories?' "

About the photo:
Pilgrims at the Dashashwamedha Ghat in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India 1992

The crucial shift has been to keep a textual-historical approach to the subject matter self-consciously in the foreground for most of the course—for approximately eleven of the fourteen weeks—but also to explore implicit or explicit criticisms of that conventional approach. Selected views of both *insiders* (emic perspectives) and *outsiders* (etic perspectives) are presented as alternatives to the dominant understanding of Asia that the course offers. Specifically, my courses now juxtapose a predominantly chronological orientation with three weeks of what I call "Contemporary Counterpoint." These weeks come at roughly one-month intervals after a 3-4 week unit on historical developments. During these weeks, history stops. I no longer lecture. Rather, I assign students to lead discussion of common reading.[3]

The books that we read during Contemporary Counterpoint weeks are carefully selected to do one of two things. First, they should help students see that Asian cultural history and cultural memory are not something mired in the hoary past, of interest only to specialists. Rather, they continue to have a bearing, sometimes direct, often oblique, on the life of contemporary Asia and Asians. A Buddhist meditation teacher once put the simple point elegantly: "What are we if not our memories?" In a very different Asian context, a contemporary Muslim puts the point this way: "Europeans, who are seldom emotionally involved in their own past history, and Americans who have little history in which to be involved, find it difficult to comprehend the immediacy—the timelessness—of certain events in Islamic history so far as Muslims are concerned."[4] These readings serve to bring the past into the present and to counteract the tendency to reify the record of past events, as students are often inclined to do in reading textbooks.

Second, these readings should help students become self-conscious about the assumptions and perspectives of the sources they are encountering during the historical survey by exposing them to dramatic alternatives. Since most textbooks and the primary sources in existing anthologies still usually