

Departmental Colloquium - History Department Summer Semester 2024

# Exploring lived forms of Female Agency and Adaptation through the figure of the “Mahari” temple performer in Odisha

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This talk focuses on histories of subaltern agency and bottom-up mobilization in the aftermath of *Devadasi* abolition and criminalization laws in independent India. It does so through the case-study of the now-extinct regional community of *Mahari-Devadasis* (undomesticated, ritual temple-dancers in the Jagannath Temple of Puri, whose practices of religiosity entailed being wed to Hindu deities). Under the colonial disciplining of deviant sexualities together with racialized bio-politics, the quotidian cultures of unmarried communities of *Devadasis*, were monolithically categorized, and criminalized

as “religious prostitution”, at a nation-wide scale. My research delineates the various ideological factors and institutional processes shaping the regulation of temple-dancing under modes of colonial governmentality, and the silencing of women’s voices under exclusionary legislations. It further underscores historical continuities in the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial, owing to Eurocentric abolitionist paradigms inscribed into legal-political structures in the independent nation-state. However, incorporating oral testimonies from the Maharis, Sashimani and Parasamani along with archival data, it delineates how Maharis historically contested top-down modalities of disenfranchisement through their quotidian cultures, social positioning, and practices of everyday life. In navigating through existing patriarchal structures, Maharis carved out circumscribed positions of autonomy towards their situational conditions in postcolonial India. This talk underscores how such life-stories posit the need to situate bottom-up, experiential perspectives into historiographies of gender, sexuality, and subalternity.



More  
information

Thursday 02.05.2024  
Room CATS 010.01.05 - Hörsaal  
16:15 CEST

Image: Photo of the 2022 Jagannath Temple Rath Yatra (Chariot Festival) where Maharis historically performed. Image clicked by Shriya Patnaik during 2022 fieldtrip to Puri