

Performing Untenable Pasts: Aesthetics and Selfhood in Kalavantula Communities of Coastal Andhra



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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A TALK BY:

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(Credit: Amar Khoday)

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Sproul Hall, Room 912
5:00 ~ 6:30 PM

This presentation examines the persistent yet invisible performance practices of former courtesans (*kalavantulu*) in coastal Andhra Pradesh, South India, who have witnessed drastic social and political transformations of their communities over the past eighty-five years or so. Narrations of selfhood and identity among these women emerge through encounters with their dance and music repertoire which they are careful to preserve “behind closed doors” in the relative privacy of their homes. These iterations of repertoire that take place with some regularity among *kalavantula* families are also the sites that produce personal and collective imaginations; identity and selfhood live through these mnemonic bodily practices. Outside the *kalavantula* community, “courtesan dance repertoire” is read as a vestige of feudal history, a sign of the “backward” and aesthetically unsophisticated past that cannot be accommodated by contemporary public taste. For some women in courtesan communities today, however, the repertoire is used as a mode of telling; it is mobilized to consolidate an otherwise untenable identity. Deliberations on lineage, the devalued nature of their cultural practices, and their experiences of nonconjugal sexuality and institutionalized concubinage unfold through the performance of music and dance. *Kalavantula* women express an ownership of the idea of the marginal; they articulate an awareness of the socio-aesthetics of their past. If we are to envision feminist ethnography as a project of documenting shifting subjectivities that are affected and transformed by a range of diverse articulatory practices, then memory-work with *kalavantulu* presents a productive site for such a project.

Davesh Soneji is Associate Professor of South Asian Religions at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He is co-editor of *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and editor of *Bharatanatyam: A Reader* (Oxford, 2010). His monograph entitled *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2011. Dr. Soneji’s current research focuses on the history of the Marathi devotional music tradition (*varkari kirtan*) in Tamilnadu and its role in the shaping of “classical” music in this region.