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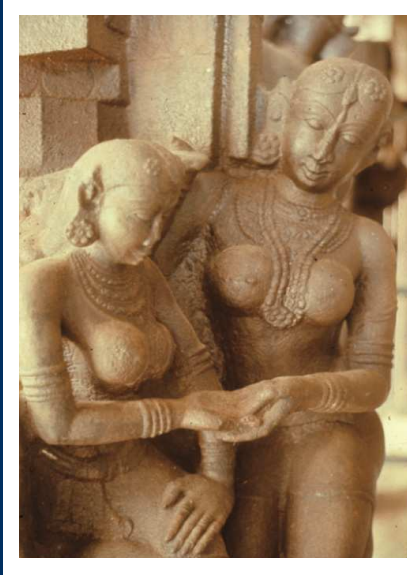


THE SECOND
ANNUAL INDIAN STUDIES LECTURE

Indira Viswanathan Peterson

David B. Truman Professor of Asian Studies,
Mount Holyoke College

“The Lovesick Lady and the Wandering Kuravanji Fortune-teller: Representing Women in an Indian Dance-Drama genre”



Thursday, May 5, 2011
Putah Creek Lodge

Welcome Reception at 5:00 p.m.
Talk at 5:30 ~ 7:00 p.m.

Followed by a response from
Prof. Davesh Soneji, McGill University

Tamil literature is remarkable for its wealth of representations of women and female perspectives. From the love poems of the Sangam classical corpus to the devotional hymns of the bhakti saints and later lyric texts of courtly dance, women, female personae, and female voices play a central role in the Tamil literary tradition. In this paper I examine representations of women in the Kuravanji, 'The Drama of the Wandering Kuravanji Fortune-teller', an opera-like literary-musical dance drama genre that arose under the patronage of the rulers of provincial South Indian kingdoms in the 18th century. Kuravanji dramas flourished in performance by female *devadasi* dancers at courts and temples well into the nineteenth century, continue to be a staple of the literary curriculum, and were revived on the Bharata Natyam (classical) dance stage in Madras in the mid-twentieth century. Focusing on the two central female characters of the Kuravanji drama -- the lady in love and the Kuratti, an itinerant fortune-teller of the hill Kuravar tribe, after whom the genre is named -- I show that the portrayal of the two women, while drawing on older and contemporary female literary personae, at the same time suggests avenues for new readings of the discourses of gender and the erotic in 18th-century Tamil literature and culture. The characterization of the wise and eloquent folk fortune-teller broadens the domain of representations of women in elite Tamil literature beyond conventional discourses of the erotic to discourses of class and social identity. The rise of the Kuravanji dance drama as the premier literary genre in the 18th century refracts the shifting configurations of culture and power in early modern South India, and signals the formation of new relationships between the court and the public.

Indira Viswanathan Peterson is David B. Truman Professor of Asian Studies at Mount Holyoke College and Five College Fortieth Anniversary Professor at the Five College Consortium of Western Massachusetts. Peterson specializes in Indian literature in Sanskrit and Tamil, Hinduism, South Indian cultural history (classical, medieval, colonial and modern) and South Indian performing arts. Her publications include *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton, 1989), *Design and Rhetoric in a Sanskrit Court Epic: The Kiratarjuniya of Bharavi* (Albany, 2003) and, with George Michell, *The Great Temple at Thanjavur: One Thousand Years* (Mumbai, 2010). She is currently writing a book on Kuravanji fortune-teller dramas and completing a biography of scholar-king Serfoji II of Tanjore.



Davesh Soneji is Associate Professor of South Asian Religions at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He is co-editor, with Indira Viswanathan Peterson, of *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (Oxford, 2008) and editor of a commissioned anthology, *Bharatanatyam: A Reader* (Oxford, 2010). He has recently completed a book on professional dancing women in the Tamil and Telugu-speaking regions of South India that integrates archival, literary and ethnographic data, entitled *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. This book is forthcoming in the "South Asia Across the Disciplines" series jointly published by the Columbia University Press, The University of Chicago Press, and The University of California Press. Prof. Soneji's current research, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 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.

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For more information, contact Prof. Archana Venkatesan at avenkatesan@ucdavis.edu
or visit our website at religions.ucdavis.edu.