



Preface

Materiality

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It gives me great pleasure to present our readers with the December 2024 issue of *Nidān: International Journal of Indian Studies* (volume 9) that, as usual, brings forth new scholarly interventions in the academic field of South Asian Studies. Titled *Material Religion, Assemblage, and the Agency of Things in South Asia*, this special issue, as outlined by our guest editor Leah Elizabeth Comeau in her introduction, emerged out of a successful panel on material religion at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, in October 2023. Comeau (both in her *Introduction* titled *Material Religion, Assemblage, and The Agency of Things in South Asia*, and in her article in this volume titled *Material Religion and the Edges of Assemblage at a South Indian Beach Festival*) and Harini Kumar (in her *Afterword* titled *An Eiffel Tower at Nagore: Spectacular Assemblages*) demonstrate how the material religion approach introduces new insights to the study of religion in South Asia. In terms of my own understanding, the material religion approach also has strong epistemic roots in ritual studies (cf. Stephenson [2015] for an overview) and the study of Indian archaeology (one of my parent disciplines). The culmination encompassed by material religion thus also expands the scope of ritual studies and archaeology to include within its purview shrines and worship practices that are beyond Hinduism, and located in the contemporary. This produces the ‘material turn’ as very dynamic, and wider in range than hitherto afforded by archaeology and ritual studies—especially in light of scholarly debates on whether popular vernacular practices could be considered ‘ritual’ at all—and whether or not including all forms of materiality would ultimately whittle away the scholarly erudition of ritual studies. While criticism of how religious studies was too preoccupied with the spiritual and intellectual domain resulted in growing interest in material religion, ritual studies and archaeology on the other hand have also broadened themselves to refocus on everyday objects, assemblages, and spaces.

Indian archaeology has always had robust interest in materiality—sculpture, architecture, art, excavated material culture, and the physical/ material/ and even chemical forms of everyday objects like coins, daily artifacts, and pottery. It is not simply the presence of materiality within an assemblage that becomes important, but it is the meaning that presence acquires based on its situatedness, or as archaeologists would say, its stratigraphy, that provides materiality with meaning, and also agency and power—an assemblage within which material, non-human/ animal, as well as humans—through mutual association—come to inhabit a negotiated matrix of influence. Comeau’s article in this volume, with many images, focuses on exactly such an assemblage that collectively produces the Masi Magam beach festival in Pondicherry. Kumar’s article, similarly, among other themes, also with many images, takes the same approach, when exploring the tableaux procession of the Nagore *dargah* during the Sufi’s *urs* in South India. Mocko’s article in this volume explores the celebration of human-non-human/ human-plant marriages that are part of everyday sociality, especially within the feminine world, among Hindu families in India and Nepal. Patel’s article, through its analysis of *manasi*, powerfully challenges the binary between material forms of worship and its spiritual/ imagined/ visualised form. Patel provocatively asks us to identify the locus of materiality in worship: in the mind that is embedded in the material world, or in the world of which the mind is a material part. In my article (my first publication using the material religion approach for which I must thank

Comeau), I have, with the help of photographic images, highlighted the importance of noticeboards, ritual objects, and public spaces at the *dargah* of Sadal Baba in Pune that produce a singular religious experience for visitors and devotees.

As expected, we also have our usual battery of interesting book reviews this time that begin with Gautam Pemmaraju's exposition of Ole Birk Laurson's *Anarchy of Chaos* that outlines the interwar years and activities of the revolutionary M.P.T. Acharya in Germany. This is followed by Heinz Werner Wessler's review of Martin Christof-Füchsle and Razak Khan's volume, *Nodes of Translation* that also explores literary interactions between India and Germany from the interwar years. Sabina Kazmi provides us a review of Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon's volume *Making the 'Woman'* that explores how gender was recast in the historical and literary records of the 18th and 19th centuries in India. Mithilesh Kumar reviews Sadan Jha's *Social City* to outline the heuristic importance of intersections that negotiate interactions between urban history, caste, vernacular markets, a subaltern and transient labour force, and migration. And again, marrying a 'material' approach to urban history, Amol Saghar reviews Shama Mitra Chenoy's translated-edited book *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857* by Ramji Das that provides readers with a history of Delhi, written from the perspective of its historic structures—made all the more piquant by the British destruction of these structures after the revolt 1857. Last but not the least, this volume contains my own review of Amrita Datta's *Stories of the Indian Migrant Communities in Germany*, a monograph that takes a bottom-up approach to the negotiated experiences and migration narratives of mostly elite Indians, produced as subaltern and unfree, by intersecting processes of modern international politics.

Apart from this usual fare, this volume contains an obituary of T.S. Rukmani penned by Professor Pratap Kumar Penumala. We lost Professor Rukmani in 2024, and this loss was not limited to the academic domain alone. For *Nidān*, this loss was also personal. As outlined earlier by Professor Penumala (2023: 7), Professor Rukmani herself once edited *Nidān* between 1993 and 1995. While the journal's editorship was henceforth spearheaded by Professor Penumala, subsequently inherited by me in 2021, Professor Rukmani remained an esteemed member of the journal's editorial board. She wrote me kind emails on two separate occasions, congratulating me on *Nidān*'s progress. Though I never knew Professor Rukmani personally, being associated with her heritage through *Nidān* is indeed an honour. Professor Rukmani's position in the *Nidān* editorial board has been assumed by Professor Leah Elizabeth Comeau, who has also guest edited this present special issue. The *Nidān* family extends its warm welcome to her.

References

Stephenson B., (2015). *Ritual: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Online Resources

Penumala P.K., (2023). "My Journey with *Nidān*: Looking Back and Looking Forward." *Nidān: International Journal for Indian Studies* 8(1): 3-9.