



Introduction

Material Religion, Assemblage, and The Agency of Things in South Asia

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This special issue is the product of our collective experiment with materials that are assembled, imagined, and agentic in the context of South Asian religions. Our first meeting was around a table at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison in 2023. The initial aim of the panel was to consider the theoretical impact of material agency on our respective subfields in South Asian Religious Studies. We also used a capsule bibliography to launch the work and to establish a spirited coherence between the articles (Bennett [2010], Pintchman and Dempsey [2016], Flueckiger [2021], and Jain [2021]). Over the past year, we have benefited from feedback and reviews from conference audience members, colleagues who generously and sometimes anonymously encouraged individual articles, our small army of peer reviewers, and the intellectual intimacies that flow through the warm backchannels of WhatsApp. In addition, each author undertook steady periods of research and reflection in order to present and to voice an interpretation of material studies that 'worked' for their specific areas of expertise. It was a privilege to work alongside this group of scholars and I am especially pleased that the articles and afterword offer readers diversity in region, religion, and disciplinary alliances.

In my own writing and teaching I am loath to turn in my whole toolbox to chase one analytical frame. My interest in new materialism (Hazard 2019) and frameworks that raise the profile of non-humans to the role of social actors is driven by multiple factors. First, I have been writing about the use of flowers and their characteristics as ephemeral organic materials in South Indian religious practices for the past two years. During this time, my thinking has swung like a pendulum between the people—farmers, priests, weavers—and the flowers—in buds, blossoms, and rot. Ascribing agency and thus varying degrees of power to flowers allows me to linger outside temple walls and to credit devotional aesthetics not only to the demands of *darshan* but also to the climate, fashion trends, and labour practices among other things, of South India. In a much broader sense, beyond the scope of the book manuscript, the material turn is one platform of many where scholars can draw attention to the two-faced global crisis of depleted and hoarded resources. My approach to materiality, for example, is continuously haunted by Bennett's distinction between materiality and materialism. Bennett explains that "American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is *antimateriality*. The sheer volume of commodities and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter" (Bennett 2010: 5). This junking—the junking of things, the junking of the earth, the junking of people—is a place where my thoughts linger and where the momentum of new materialism as of yet stalls out.

Returning to the focus of this issue, assemblage and the placement of material religion lenses on ethnographic sites and devotional practices has proven to be nonetheless a fruitful opportunity to walk, not run, through a guided meditation or a processional caravan.

The first article by Deepra Dandekar interrogates the transformative power of various ritual objects and the spatially defined relationships that occur at the *dargah* of the Sufi Sadal Baba in Pune, a site largely inhabited by Hindu devotees. A chorus of sign boards tells newcomers

how to behave and limits the privileges of women. The bag-and-shovel ritual both preserves local Islamic history and continues to enliven the devotion of Hindus who are attracted to the Sufi saint. Keeping true to the unevenness of assemblage, Dandekar's description of powerful memories and miraculous transformations concludes with the tying and untying of red wish threads, some of which possess the ability to resist their own untying. In all, readers are led through a variety of material processes that communicate the vibrancy of the Sufi saint as well as uphold hierarchies of power and access at the sacred site.

In the second article, Anne Mocko brings her expertise in ritual studies to bear on the tradition of *tulsi vivaha*, a wedding ritual that is entirely staged by people but that features a basil plant as the well-dressed bride. Drawing on these plant-centred weddings, as well as examples of nuptials with fossils, fruit, frogs, and dogs, Mocko demonstrates that these non-human actors are not imagined to be long-term marriage partners. Rather, they are critical sites for rethinking and expanding the possibilities of the world, allowing devotees to bring divine presences into their midst or troubled families to resolve their very human problems. With her eye trained on assembled materials for this special issue and the potential agency that they exert, Mocko guides the reader through an elevated reading of what humans do with their rituals, how rituals act upon devotees, *as well as* what 'thing power' the non-human actors contribute to shaping and enlivening human realities.

In the third article, Iva Patel proposes bhakti assemblage as a new concept that promotes engagement with the interplay between humans and objects across physical and imagined realms that is cultivated through cognitive practices. In particular, Patel focuses on devotional visualization called *manasi* which is a practice of cognitive engagement with the divine that is collapsed with the physical realm of the devotee. For example, a devotee can painstakingly build a temple in his imagination that rivals a stone temple built by a king or burn his finger on a hot food offering that he prepares in his mind. Using examples of *manasi* as practiced in three bhakti traditions, Swaminarayan, Pushtimarg, and Gaudiya, Patel illustrates how devotees draw on well-established conventions, their own creativity, and deep wells of personal emotion in order to assemble, admire, and be affected by devotional materials—be they spectacular or mundane—in their minds.

In the fourth article, my contribution to this special issue attributes agency and vitality to humans, organic and inorganic materials, and a festival event that takes place at a beach in Pondicherry, South India. I begin with the decorated procession cart of a Hindu goddess, and then follow her through the contexts of both the planned schedule of the procession and the spontaneous responses to unplanned events and conditions of the day. By redistributing agentive power to human and non-human material actants that inhabit the festival, I thus propose the dissolution of any real or perceived duality between spiritual devotees and the material world. I also explore the role of the author in establishing the edges of ad hoc collectives at religious events through observation and writing while somehow also being subject to the destabilizing and porous nature of the very same assemblage. I demonstrate that the open wholes of assemblages aid in disrupting the exaggerated stability or the neat 'containability' of religious life.

Finally in the Afterword to the special issue, Harini Kumar presents two expressions of South Asian Islam; first, in the festive LED-lit tableaux that process annually behind a chariot transporting a sacred vessel from Nagapattinam to Nagore in Tamil Nadu and second, the instalment of a Nagore saint in a Hindu temple in Brooklyn, New York. Kumar applies the fluid, unifying, and disruptive characteristics of assemblage to disband Hindu-Muslim binaries in these contexts where both Muslims and Hindus are co-mingling authoritative participants. Kumar also shows how material religion fortifies the very efficacy of ritual and festival events

and calls on us to continue to develop analytical tools that attend to the more-than-human things that undoubtedly populate religious life while also justly holding accountable the role and real limits of human actors.

Collectively, this special issue is composed of models and proposals for framing materiality in partnership with methodologies in religion, anthropology, literature, and history all with the humble goal of understanding religion through objects. We invite readers to read, question, and share our writing—untying a few lively wish-threads in the process.

References

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