Mount Carmel College, Autonomous. Department of English

Title: Online Talk on Narrative and Literary Form in South Asian Religious Literature

Date: 21 Aug 2023

Time: 6:30 pm

Venue: Online

Host: Department of English

The department of English organised an online talk titled “Narrative and Literary Form in South Asian Religious Literature” by Dr. Jay Ramesh on Monday, 21 Aug 2023 at 6:30 pm. This talk was compulsory for final year MA English students. It was also open to other students, faculty, research scholars, and interested listeners. The one and a half hour talk was conducted on the Zoom platform and was attended by 81 listeners.

Dr. Sreevidya Surendran introduced the speaker, Dr. Jay Ramesh, faculty of the Religious Studies department of Columbia University, USA. Dr.Jay Ramesh is a Lecturer in Tamil and Sanskrit at Columbia University. His 2020 doctoral dissertation examined the manner in which shrines, cities, and their surrounding landscapes were eulogized by poets in both of those languages, and the importance of the collective memory of a mythic past in the experiences of devotees visiting those sacred spaces. His current research focuses on the religious importance of river landscapes in premodern Tamil Nadu and on the consequences of environmental degradation faced by Hindus in that region today. In addition to Columbia, he has previously taught at Claremont McKenna College, the University of Wisconsin and Stony Brook University.

Using examples from Sanskrit texts, music, film, and literary criticism, Dr. Ramesh gave the listeners an overview of the different socio-political and linguistic influences that have affected the understanding and archiving of religious texts in the South Asia. He also drew the important distinction between religion as normative cultural practice and religion as a choice-based cultural practice. He pointed out this effected different renderings of the same story and laid down social codes of conduct via the mystical medium of religion and spirituality. He delved into Indian aesthetic theory and drew connections between cultural variations in the same mythological narratives based on the primary rasa in focus. He dwelt on the tension between Sanskrit and Tamil religious literatures and pointed out the presence of a self-reflexive, intertextual awareness that exists between multiple reiterations of the same story.

The talk was extremely effective in providing a broad understanding of ancient Indian literary traditions and the aesthetics and methods used by the artists of the time to communicate subjective values within the bounds of religious and mythological writing. This talk was particularly useful for our MA students, especially those who had chosen to work with the elective course “Epics, Myths and Mysticism”. It was also helpful to the II year UG course students whose English Core papers—“Indian Literary Movements and Ages”, and “Indian Narratives and Performance”—are based on Indian literary traditions.

The talk was well received and whetted the intellectual appetites of the listeners, leaving them curious and inspired to learn more about the epic traditions and mythologies of South Asia.

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