



CENTRE FOR ASIAN AND
TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

SOUTH ASIA
INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386

Lecture Series on Governance and Politics in South Asia

Department of Political Science

Special Lecture on

Western Women, Indian Gurus

by

Professor Ruth Harris

University of Oxford

This paper will take a new look at the complex relationship between Vivekananda and his female acolytes. He sought to harness 'emancipated' female activism and avant-garde spirituality to 'traditional' Hindu visions of wifedom, motherhood, and female sainthood. When he travelled west, he recognised the 'feminization of religion' in Christianity and the importance of the explosion of female service and reformist activism both at home and in the missionary fields. Vivekananda's accomplishment was to invert the normal alliances, with western women coming to oppose Christian missionaries, and Indian female figures becoming the new saints of Hindu Universalism. Vivekananda was thus audacious in fostering the links between women – both east and west – as well as promoting female symbolism in his vision of 'global' Vedanta. Ramakrishna's widow, Sarada Devi, was central to his work from the outset, and exemplified his hopes for the future when she broke Brahmanical taboos to welcome the foreign women as her friends. But without the help of his female followers in the west, he would never have been able to implant his ideas, press for cultural relativism, and open new spiritual horizons, let alone fund institutions at home and abroad. They allowed him to enter the world of American 'New Thought' and compose 'Raja Yoga' in a style and idiom that reflected their concerns with healing and 'mind cure'. Similarly, aspects of Hindu nationalism and the dynamism of Kali-worship is equally unthinkable without Margaret Noble and the intensity of guru-disciple bond that she forged with Vivekananda.



Professor Ruth Harris teaches history at All Souls College, University of Oxford. Her research centres on the history of Modern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She focusses especially on France, writing interdisciplinary cultural history that combines the history of religion and gender, as well as medicine and science. She has also begun a large project on religious revival which focuses on the links between South Asia and the West. She has published on Gandhi and Romain Rolland; analysing the Indian origins of Albert Schweitzer's 'reverence for life,' and is undertaking new work on Anagarika Dharmapala, Vivekananda and their relationship to Western thought. Her published work on these subjects include *The Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and The Affair that Divided France*, (Harmondsworth, 2010), *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (1998) and *Murders and Madness: Medicine, Law and Psychiatry* (Oxford, 1989).

Date: Monday, 18 October 2021

Time: 14:00 – 16:00, CEST

Venue: CATS Lecture Room 010.00.06 (max. 19 persons)

Online: via Zoom < <https://bit.ly/3a5EowZ> >

Passcode: 812 5314 7896

Meeting Id: TheoryM21