

## **Report on the international conference "Round Table on South Asian Rituals" (27th -29th November 2003)**

From 27th to 29th of November 2003 the conference titled "Round Table on South Asian Rituals" was conducted at Internationales Wissenschaftsforum, Heidelberg. It was organized by Ute Hüsken, Srilata Raman-Müller (Project A3) and Jörg Gengnagel (Project B5). The workshop was conducted within the wider framework of the long-term interdisciplinary research project titled "Ritual Dynamics" of Heidelberg University and generously financed by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), Bonn.

The invited speakers were Dominic Goodall (Pondichery, Indien), Srivatsa Goswami (Sri Caitanya Prema Samsthana, Vrindavan), Alexis Sanderson (All Souls College, Oxford), Oliver Freiberger (Bayreuth), and Asko Parpola (Helsinki). The speakers on the side of the Heidelberg Sonderforschungsbereich were Monika Boehm-Tettelbach (Projects B 5 and A 3), Jörg Gengnagel (Project B 5), Ute Hüsken (Project A 3), Axel Michaels and Johanna Buß (Project A 2), and Srilata Raman-Müller (Project A 3).

The "round table" was designed as an semi-formal exchange of scholars doing research in fields closely related to rituals. Nevertheless the participants were asked beforehand to link their individual research projects with some specified general themes connected with ritual studies in their presentation. Thus the "round table" was conceived as facilitating a general discussion relating to the study of rituals in South Asia even while focusing on the individual research projects.

The conference started on the evening of the 27th of November with a reception for the invited speakers at the IWH. Axel Michaels as the speaker of the Sonderforschungsbereich welcomed the participants and, in his opening address, spoke about the various sub-projects and the general aims of the Sonderforschungsbereich "ritual dynamics".

Many topics of importance for the study of ritual dynamics were addressed in the various contributions. One of them was "Religious texts and ritual". This issue was dealt with on diverse levels. Thus the relationship between "normative" theological texts and the ritual literature of a particular tradition was intensively dealt with: does the latter reflect the actual "nature" of the religious tradition better than the theological literature? Is there necessarily a linkage between ritualism (religious rituals) and soteriology? Dominic Goodall could convincingly show that there is in fact a cross-system borrowing of ritual elements even in traditions which are trying to invest each and every rite with specific sectarian meaning (doctrinal insertions). Goodall, in his paper "On the throne of worship", in a detailed textual reading of tantric literature demonstrated that there is a high degree of intertextuality which emerges through various methods of imitation and borrowing and which also produces textual, ritual variance. The general question as to "Why ritual?" from an emic perspective, particularly when the performer is considered to have achieved a state of perfectability which makes ritual irrelevant was considered and the resultant religious conflict and its social implications were addressed by Monika Boehm-Tettelbach in her paper titled, 'Why ritual: An eighteenth-century debate'. The question arose, why failures in ritual should matter at all when the reparation ritual is already one ingredient of the performance. The "state of mind" of the performer is considered an important factor of ritual evaluation: there are "good rituals" (performed at the right time with the correct state of mind) and "bad" or "unsuccessful rituals" (performed with an "unappropriate" state of mind). Here the aspect of agency and authority is relevant: who has the authority to declare a certain ritual and / or state of mind as "bad" or to declare a ritual performance as "inappropriate" or even failed? From what is this competence derived? (Ute

Hüsken) Related to this issue is the question of a ritual "prototype" and "modified rituals" as well as the issue of "failure" and "correct performance" of ritual. It became evident that learning on the side of the ritual specialists is primarily achieved by participating in the ritual procedures and from the handing down of ritual practice from father to son (Srivatsa Goswamy, Ute Hüsken). At the same time such learning is not totally disconnected from the texts, as can be seen from the modern attempts to reestablish textual authority as authoritative source (Srilata Raman-Müller; Srivatsa Goswamy). Although the "perfect ritual" can generally not be found in the texts (Axel Michaels) the role of ritual texts for the performance cannot be underestimated: "what the texts teach, the Guru applies" (Dominic Goodall) - "the Satguru will not willingly deviate from the rules in the texts" (Srivatsa Goswamy).

Moreover, Srilata Raman-Müller addressed the issue of "intentionality" and "subjectivity" in modernist interpretation of traditional rituals in which the participants in the ritual – well aware of its pre-stipulated nature – attempt to interrupt it and inject meaning into it. This then challenges Humphrey and Laidlaw's understanding of ritual as per se fixedly non-intentional. The question arose whether the quest for meaning in rituals is more prominent in rapidly changing social contexts such as in the diaspora.

Dealing with the issue of ritual failure, especially Srivatsa Goswamy's contribution made clear, that new rules are created by the breaking of old rules. Two strands seem to exist side by side: the fixed rules and the possibility for deviations in case it is necessary. This is provided for in the texts which e.g. say that the whole procedure for *dīkṣā* is obligatory but, if it turns out to be necessary, also the "abbreviated *dīkṣā*" (*saṃkṣiptadīkṣā*) can be applied. "Deviations from the rules" are factored by referring to "local custom" and "historical circumstances" (*deśācāra* and *kālācāra*). Intentional deviations are moreover explained by *moha*, *lobha* or *parapīḍana* (external force) (Dominic Goodall). Moreover, texts, in a sense, allow for diverse categories of mistakes, since in most of the ritual procedures an "atonement rite" is included. The texts differentiate between conscious and unconscious mistakes; the conscious mistakes can again be subdivided into intentional and unintentional mistakes in ritual. Each of these failures have different forms of expiation (Alexis Sanderson). This might be derived from vedic rituals which requires the performer to take an oath not to make mistakes (Asko Parpola).

Failure of ritual as such seems to be virtually impossible. If, however, a ritual failed, it is declared as such in retrospective. Thus there are examples of failed *dīkṣās*: if the initiand later on converts to another sect, the initiation is in retrospect declared as having failed (Dominic Goodall). Moreover, deviations are not necessarily considered as mistakes; they can also be seen as *līlā*, since the Arcaka is considered the mechanical vehicle of God's will. (Srivatsa Goswamy). Therefore, it is important to see who decides on the rules: texts and ritual experts, such as the priests, are equally authoritative (Axel Michaels), even while texts themselves stress that the Ācārya or Guru is the final arbitrator (Alexis Sanderson, Srivatsa Goswamy).

Aesthetics as an aspect of the study of ritual, is in general largely neglected. Srivatsa Goswamy gave various examples from his own ritual tradition where the aesthetic elements of ritual (dance, singing, use of unguents and flowers, theatre) is fundamental to many, contemporary, devotional ritual traditions. He, thus, highlighted ritual performance as generating aesthetic pleasure.

Axel Michaels referred to ritual structures and formality, speaking of a "pool" of rituals elements or a "floating inventory of ritual actions" in the context of the performance of a single ritual (the death ritual for the Newars of Kathmandu Valley) of which not a single one seems to be obligatory. His paper thus pointed in the direction of a polythetic definition of rituals which is also very much a focal issue for discussion within the SFB. Axel Michaels moreover listed some techniques regarding creativity and improvisation during the performance of ritual. This list of techniques was perfectly complemented by the features of

ritual transfer which were discovered by Dominic Goodall with regard to ritualized meditation on the "throne of worship" within Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava tantric traditions. Dominic Goodall mentioned the "copy and paste" method, imitation, elaboration by filling out a known sequence, etc., as modes of (re)creation of rituals and creativity within rituals. One of Alexis Sanderson's remarks on Dominic Goodall's paper referred to the actual practice of the meditation ritual presented by him. According to Sanderson, the text containing the method of visualisation during meditation is in fact recited and thus becomes itself object of the ritual. Here it became again evident that one strictly has to distinguish between emic and etic perspectives and take into account this relation into our usage of terms. Thus one has to be very careful about the use of the terms "mistake", "invention" and so on when talking about rituals. Alexis Sanderson convincingly argued for a nuanced understanding of the nature of ritual texts and their socio-historical contexts. Hence, one has to distinguish between āgamic texts which provide the most generalized level of abstraction when it comes to ritual, a broad matrix as it were from ritual literature. In this category again distinction has to be made between texts which avoid overdefinition in order to be applicable by larger social groups or over a wider geographic area and those texts which are modified to cater to specific clientele. In other words, his paper argued for textual innovation which paralleled innovation in performance.

Oliver Freiberger's paper touched upon the crucial issue of the irreversibility rituals, in this case the ritual to become an ascetic. In Alexis Sanderson's and Oliver Freiberger's papers moreover the social and cultural context of rituals was addressed, which is not in the foreground in the texts but nevertheless shapes texts as much as performance. Here the question as to the role of economy in ritual perfectly fits in, which Joerg Gengnagel addressed in his paper on the importance of ritual for the strategy of politics. Gengnagel's paper, also focusing on the socio-historical context, demonstrated the issue of the "invention" or "re-discovery" of ritual when it came to coronation ceremonies in the Indian context. How is one to stage an event for which no obvious textual precedent could be found and legitimize this through ritual? This important question was the focus of his paper.

Through the stimulating papers and the intensive discussions which followed, the "round table" contributed to the intensification of already established long-term contacts and the academic exchange between the participating scholars and their institutions.