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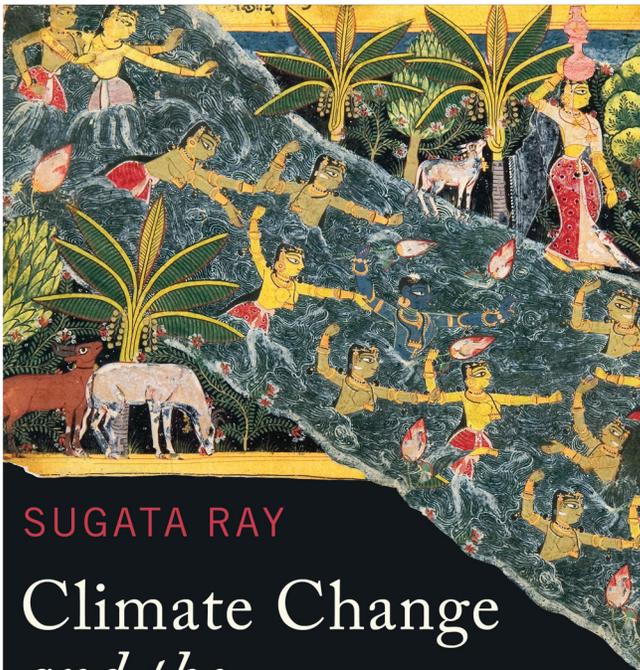
Fall 2019

### CLIMATE CHANGE & THE ART OF DEVOTION *Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550-1850*

**Sugata Ray**

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University of California, Berkeley

In the enchanted world of Braj, the primary pilgrimage center in north India for worshippers of Krishna, each stone, river, and tree is considered sacred. In *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*, Sugata Ray shows how this place-centered theology emerged in the wake of the Little Ice Age (ca. 1550–1850), an epoch marked by climatic catastrophes across the globe. Using the frame of geoaesthetics, he compares early modern conceptions of the environment and current assumptions about nature and culture.



SUGATA RAY

## Climate Change *and the* Art of Devotion

GEOAESTHETICS IN  
THE LAND OF KRISHNA,  
1550–1850

A ground-breaking contribution to the emerging field of eco-art history, the book examines architecture, paintings, photography, and prints created in Braj alongside theological treatises and devotional poetry to foreground seepages between the natural ecosystem and cultural production. The paintings of deified rivers, temples that emulate fragrant groves, and talismanic bleeding rocks that Ray discusses will captivate readers interested in environmental humanities and South Asian art history.

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## SUMMARY

IN THE ENCHANTED WORLD OF BRAJ, THE PRIMARY PILGRIMAGE CENTER IN NORTH INDIA FOR WORSHIPPERS OF KRISHNA, EACH STONE, RIVER, AND TREE IS CONSIDERED SACRED.

THE BOOK SHOWS HOW THIS PLACE-CENTERED THEOLOGY EMERGED IN THE WAKE OF THE LITTLE ICE AGE (CA. 1550-1850), AN EPOCH MARKED BY CLIMATIC CATASTROPHES ACROSS THE GLOBE.

A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO THE EMERGING FIELD OF ECO-ART HISTORY

THE AUTHOR COMPARES EARLY MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND CURRENT ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT NATURE AND CULTURE.

EXAMINING ARCHITECTURE, PAINTINGS, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND PRINTS CREATED IN BRAJ ALONGSIDE THEOLOGICAL TREATISES AND DEVOTIONAL POETRY, THE AUTHOR EXPLORES SEEPAGES BETWEEN THE NATURAL ECOSYSTEM AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION.



**SUGATA RAY** is an associate professor of South and Southeast Asian art at the University of California, Berkeley. Trained in both history (Presidency College; Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta) and art history (Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda; University of Minnesota), his research focuses on the intersections among early modern and colonial artistic cultures, transterritorial ecologies, and the natural environment. As an extension of his interest in the field of eco art history, Ray has coedited *Ecologies, Aesthetics, and Histories of Art* (2020; with Gerhard Wolf and Hannah Baader, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut) and *Water Histories of South Asia: The Materiality of Liquescence* (2020; with Venugopal Maddipati, Ambedkar University, Delhi).

Ray's current book project, provisionally titled *Matter, Material, Materiality: Indian Ocean Art Histories in the Early Modern World*, focuses on the global trade in exotica, natural resources, and luxury objects that shaped ecocultural perceptions of the Indian Ocean in the early modern period. In the past, Ray has published essays on theories of collecting and

## INTRODUCTION

### CLIMATE CHANGE AND ART HISTORY

Rivers of love. Alchemic mountains. Bowers of stone. *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion* takes the reader on a journey through the enchanted world of Braj, the primary pilgrimage site in India for worshippers of Krishna. According to scriptural texts, Braj is the site where



1.1 Map of major sites in South Asia mentioned in this book. Courtesy Ramón De Santiago.

Krishna lives eternally. Consequently, each stone, river, and tree in the pilgrimage center is considered sacred and effervescent with vibrant energy. This extraordinary place-oriented theology based on venerating the natural environment, however, found articulation only after the commencement of the Little Ice Age (ca. 1550–1850), a climatic epoch marked by droughts of unprecedented intensity across the world. It was during the ecological catastrophes of the sixteenth century that theologians traveled to Braj—sixty miles south of India's capital New Delhi—to “discover” the sites associated with Krishna's life on earth. In time, a rich visual culture of Krishna worship developed in the region, one that triangulated affective aesthetics, political governance, and natural resource management

*Climate Change and the Art of Devotion* thus moves between the creative practices based on sacramental theology that developed in early modern Braj and

the transterritorial climatic fields of an ecological crisis that paralleled it. Emphasizing the interrelationship between matter and life—both human and nonhuman—in shaping art and architecture in Braj, the book foregrounds the seepages between the natural ecosystem and creative configurations. In this process, a geoaesthetic art history of the ecological crisis now designated as the Little Ice Age comes to

***Geoaesthetics unmoors art history's epistemological scope, given the anthropocentric exceptionalism that is allocated by art history to the conceptual category called the human. Eco art history is the name of that which we stand to gain from this unmooring***

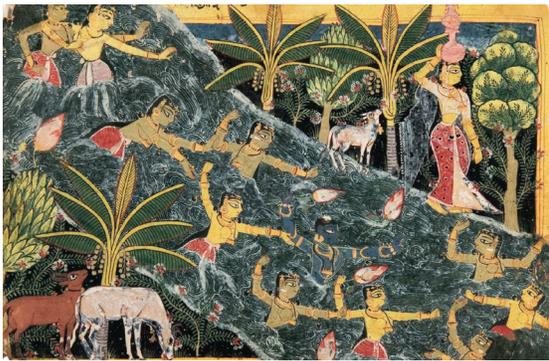
the fore. Defining geoaesthetics as an approach within art history, the book addresses artistic and architectural practices that were shaped through human interaction with geographical, geological, botanical, zoological, mineralogical, astronomical, and climatic formations. Moving from sixteenth-century illustrated manuscripts that were commissioned when the site was established to nineteenth-century architecture, the book documents and narrates the key moments of artistic and architectural innovations in Braj.



1.2 Page of disasters from *Tarikh-i Alfi*, ca. 1595. Ink and color on paper, 41 × 22.6 cm. Repository: The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund 1932.36.b. Photo © The Cleveland Museum of Art.

## ONE | WATER

Water was central to artistic expression during the calamitous droughts that commenced with the onset of the Little Ice Age. Although pre-sixteenth-century ritualistic norms mandated haptic and gustatory absorption as primary forms of engagement with sacred water, by the mid-sixteenth century, liturgical texts in Braj asserted that beholding the theophanic presence of the river Yamuna as it flowed through the pilgrimage site was sufficient for attaining ritual purity. The vision-centrism of theology generated new systems of architecture and painting that emphasized the liquescence of water by framing a view of the river Yamuna. This hydroaesthetics of art and architecture developed in an era marked by the death of five million people from El Niño-induced droughts.



1.1 Krishna's water sport, *Isarda Bhagavata Purana*, ca. 1560–70. Opaque watercolor on paper, 18.8 × 25.2 cm. Repository: The San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.586. Photo courtesy The San Diego Museum of Art.

***depiction of the river Yamuna in a single folio of the Isarda Bhāgavata Purāna (1.1) to monumental riparian architecture (1.2), hydroaesthetics, in this specific instance, intrinsically interconnected art and architecture practices to an expanded, nonhuman, transterritorial arena of water scarcity and drought. This interconnectedness opens up new passages in art history, ecological passages that bring to the forefront a reciprocal relationship between climate change and acts of visualizing water.***



1.2 Vishram Ghat, Mathura

The sweeping rearrangement of both the natural and the built environment in early modern Braj consequently provides a distinct perspective to the reciprocal relationship between climate change and artistic practice. Emerging from the interstices of creative interventions, religious cultures, and extensive environmental transformation, paintings and architecture produced in Braj also present us with an exemplary site to explore an ideation of an eco art history. In such an ideation, the act of seeing water becomes the crucial link that connects localized liturgical aesthetics with an expanded transterritorial arena of water scarcity and drought.

archiving, postcolonial theory, and methodologies for a global art history in journals such as *Art History* and *The Art Bulletin*. His 2016 essay on the collecting of Islamic art in the United States was awarded the Historians of Islamic Art Association's Margaret B. Ševčenko Prize. Ray has recently guest edited a special issue of *Ars Orientalis* (2018) on translations, terminologies, and global art history.

Ray's research has been supported by grants and fellowships from the American Institute of Indian Studies, the Social Science Research Council, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, the Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin, the Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin and Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, the Townsend Center for the Humanities, the University of California Humanities Research Institute, the Hellman Family Fund, and the College Art Association's Meiss Publication Fund. He has spoken internationally on climate change and the visual arts and delivered keynotes at conferences, museums, and nonprofit organizations on eco art history.

Affiliated with the Institute for South Asia Studies and the Designated Emphasis in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies, Sugata Ray teaches courses on South and Southeast Asian art, as well as thematic seminars on global early modern art, eco art history, theories of collecting and archiving, postcolonial theory, and methodologies for a global art history.

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ART OF DEVOTION: GEOAESTHETICS IN THE LAND OF KRISHNA, 1550-1850

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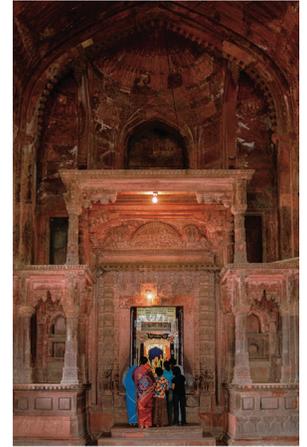
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## TWO | LAND



2.1 Satellite image of Govardhan ridge and the Yamuna. Source: ArcGIS Online map hosted by Esri. Image is the intellectual property of Esri and is used herein under license. Copyright © 2018 Esri, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS.

Land encompasses the alchemic, talismanic, and agentive nature of stone. In sixteenth-century texts, Govardhan (2.1), a sandstone ridge in Braj rich in feldspar, mica, calcite, and opaque minerals, was reconfigured as an embodied lithic form of Krishna himself. The vibrant materiality of this specific ridge was linked to the materiality of temples constructed with the same sandstone (2.2), along with the emergence of a new temple style in Braj that was based on conceptualizations of the earth as divine geobody, a living being that bled if wounded. A focus on Govardhan hill as embodied land—as both a living being and a low homoclinal quartzite ridge extending some five miles northeast to southwest—thus allows us to approach assemblages of human-nonhuman relationships that shaped art and architecture practices in early modern South Asia. Rather than considering the landscape, which from



2.2 Interior, view from east entrance, Govind Dev Temple, Vrindavan, 1590

***The methodologies of eco art history might allow us to rethink stone as not just material that leads to art histories of human labor, trade, production, and technology but as material imbued with agency and caught up in processual flows. (2.3) It is in the conjoining of material and materiality, the physical and the phenomenological, that stone becomes more than itself.***



2.3 Rock sample from Govardhan hill. Photo courtesy Julie Wolf.

***Stone, aligned differently, becomes effervescent matter with the potential to unravel the ostensible dichotomies between nature and culture that haunt our anthropogenic present.***

an eco-art historical perspective merely reiterates the reducibility of the natural environment into a picture regulated by the anthropocentric human subject, this chapter engages with the geomorphological material that constitutes land—the texture of stone, the granulation of dust, the color of soil—as both sacramental substance and agentive matter within the theological worlds of early modern Braj (2.4).



2.4 The worship of Govardhan hill.

## THREE | FOREST



3.1 Nihalchand (attr.), *The Bower of Quiet Passion*, Kishangarh, ca. 1745–50. Repository: The San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.756.

Forests had been extensively reclaimed for agriculture by the 1750s in Braj, drastically transforming the region's fragile ecosystem. How did the topophilic theology of venerating natural phenomena contend with this sweeping alteration of the agrolandscape? Eighteenth-century paintings (3.1) and temple architecture (3.2) reveal the unfolding of a vegetal aesthetic of plants, vines, and flowers in Braj. As deforestation accelerated in the region, the surfaces of paintings and temple façades became more elaborately ornamented with floral imagery. Here, ornament was not merely decorative or allegorical but an episteme that connected lived practices with visual form. Eighteenth-century architecture embellished with extravagant vegetal motifs also inaugurated a design idiom that continued well into the nineteenth century, reaffirming the efficacy of this new vegetal aesthetics in a larger north Indian world.

***It is not the picturesque, an abstracted act of disembodied looking, but the act of dwelling or being in the oikos as habitus that offers a framework to envisage a more capacious relationship between species. While the project of writing the history of colonial attempts to reshape the natural environment is unquestionably an important task, an engagement with phyto-worlds solely through a modernist paradigm that focuses on human mediations in ordering, managing, and mastering the ecologies of plants, flowers, fruits, roots, and seeds runs the risk of marginalizing practices at the edges of statist environmentalisms. Rather than the humdrum of statist discourse, the small voices of pilgrims, poets, artists, and priests in Braj demonstrate that the objectification of nature through institutionalized scientificism was not the only way to see the environment in the era of colonial botany.***

An account of the vegetal aesthetics that materialized in eighteenth-century Braj brings to the fore practices that have been sidelined by scholarship on early modern plant cultures. With an emphasis on large-scale imperial systems, art histories of post-sixteenth-century South Asia have largely tended to focus on Mughal gardens, the colonial picturesque, gardens established by British botanists, and the depiction of plants in painting as a form of far-reaching environmental governance. In its place, a focus on what the historian Ranajit Guha has described as “the small voice of history” allows us to underscore the function of the gestural, the corporeal, and the ritualized in the era of early modern scientificism in shaping a vegetal aesthetics in Braj (3.3).

Forests had been extensively reclaimed for agriculture by the 1750s in Braj, drastically transforming the region's fragile ecosystem. How did the topophilic theology of venerating natural phenomena contend with this sweeping alteration of the agrolandscape? Eighteenth-century paintings (3.1) and temple architecture (3.2) reveal the unfolding of a vegetal aesthetic of plants, vines, and flowers in Braj. As deforestation accelerated in the region, the surfaces of paintings and temple façades became more elaborately ornamented with floral imagery. Here, ornament was not merely decorative or allegorical but an episteme that connected lived practices with visual form. Eighteenth-century architecture embellished with extravagant vegetal motifs also inaugurated a design idiom that continued well into the nineteenth century, reaffirming the efficacy of this new vegetal aesthetics in a larger north Indian world.



3.2 Central shrine, Gangamohan Kunj, Vrindavan, ca. 1750



3.3 Bowers in Seva Kunj, Vrindavan, with recent bamboo scaffolding.

## PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

*The rocks, rivers, forests, plants, animals, and even the skies of the Mathura-Vrindavan region in north India come alive as historical agents acting alongside humans in Ray's pioneering and imaginative attempt to develop a geoaesthetic approach to the study of Hindu religious art and architecture over a period ranging from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. His impressive ability to connect events in the realm of aesthetics and religious devotion with the climatic impact of the Little Ice Age in South Asia, is bound to influence debates in art history in South Asia and beyond. A brilliant achievement."*

— DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, Professor of History, University of Chicago

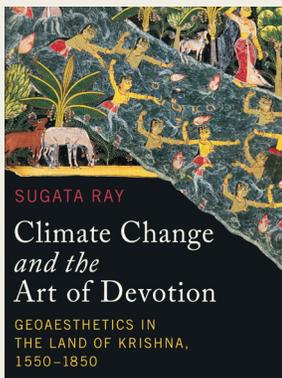
*A bold and ambitious project that takes on a sweeping range of issues across both the humanities and social sciences. Ray brings core Indian material into dialogue with current conversations about the relationship between the human and nonhuman, between materiality and immateriality, and climate change and visual culture. The book serves as a challenge to future scholars to expand the range of their own conversations.*

— TAMARA SEARS, author of *Worldly Gurus and Spiritual Kings: Architecture and Asceticism in Medieval India*

*Ray draws an unexpected and strikingly original connection between the catastrophic consequences of the Little Ice Age and the rise of a site-specific theology at the pilgrim centre of Braj in India. This scholarly, elegantly written art historical monograph that skilfully combines archival scholarship with theoretical sophistication, makes a powerful contribution to recent debates on the environmental crisis in the present anthropocene epoch.*

— PARTHA MITTER, author of *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde – 1922-1947*

BUY



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**FOUR | ETHER**

Ether, the fifth element in Vaishnava philosophy, connects the infinitesimal with the galactic. Within it, the materiality of rivers, hills, and forests exist in a state of multi-vectored fluidity. Completed immediately after the last droughts of the Little Ice

Age, the natural



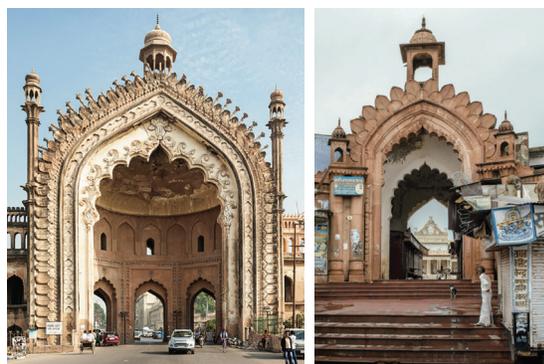
4.1 Shahji Temple, Vrindavan, 1868.

element of ether (*akasa*) is central to the 1868 Shahji Temple in Vrindavan (4.1). Citing British neoclassical architecture (4.2), earlier Islamic form (4.3; 4.4) and



4.2 Robert Adam, north front, Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire, 1760. Photo © National Trust Images/Rupert Truman.

Baroque columns made famous by Bernini's bronze baldachin in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome (4.5; 4.6), the 1868 temple ushers an



4.3 (Left) Gateway, Shahji Temple, Vrindavan, 1868. And 4.4 (Right) Roman Gateway (Rumi Darwaza), Lucknow, 1784. Photo courtesy iStock.com/saiko3p.



4.5 Solomonic columns. Front portico, Shahji Temple, Vrindavan, 1868.

enables a visualization of *akasa* as an architectural praxis situated in space but expansive in vision.

architectural paradigm that dialogically connects colonial cultural ecologies to the ecologies of effervescent cosmic matter. Intersections between the local and the global



4.6 Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Baldachin, Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome, 1624-33.

**Modern religious architecture created through an appropriation of neoclassical styles, then, became the site through which the deterritorialized space of colonial governance was (re)inhabited as the expansive oikos of a recalcitrant Vaishnava aesthetics. For us, the temple opens up the possibility of locating architecture within a deep matrix that straddles political imaginaries, ecological imperatives, and aesthetic form.**

Within art history, concept-terms such as deterritorialization, hybridity, mestizaje, and creolization have offered ways to envisage entanglements and encounters on a global scale. The 1868 neoclassical temple allows for the conception of an eco art history that is attuned to such global arrangements, for the move from kunstgeographie to geoaesthetics that the iconography of ether prompts makes possible a critical mediation that connects human communities to the natural world on both local and worldly scales. Simultaneously, the mobilization of the term ether—*akasa*—offers an alternative genealogy for an eco art history not centered on notions of the ecology as articulated in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century.

## CODA

### GEOAESTHETICS IN A HINDU PILGRIMAGE TOWN

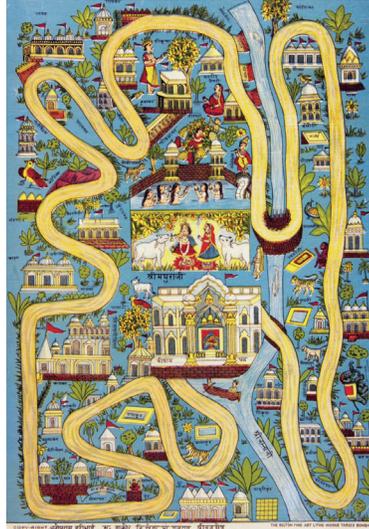


5.1 Pichvai for circumambulation of Braj, Nathdwara, ca. 1830. Repository: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Purchased 2005, NGA 2005.354. Photo courtesy National Gallery of Australia.

of geoaesthetics, not merely as nostalgia for unspoiled nature but as a distinctive artistic schema for representing the celestial and the terrestrial, allowed for a relinking of human action and embodied space in early twentieth-century Braj. A new cartography of immanence was created in the twentieth century, and with this, a new space invented again. For Vaishnava practitioners, this new space may well have surpassed the state space of the British empire, the space of order, reason, and logic, the space of scientists, urban planners, and engineers, to become the space of lived experiences, space invested with symbolism and magic. It is in the heteroglossic speech-act of remaking colonial state space that colonial images also departed from precolonial paintings of Braj. The story of Braj, then, resists closure. It demands dexterous epistemological shifts to adequately account for multivalent narratives of geoaesthetics.

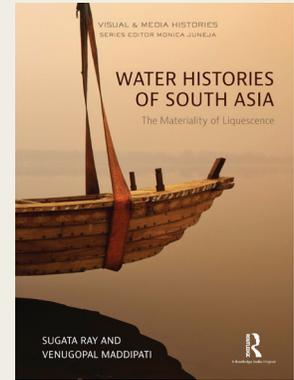
**Acknowledged by the government of India's Central Pollution Control Board in the 2000s as the most polluted river in India, the Yamuna that traverses the pilgrimage site is now deemed fit only for irrigation and industrial cooling, ruling out the possibility of either human consumption or aquatic life. As the river flows through the industrial belts of Delhi, Ghaziabad, Noida, and Faridabad, untreated domestic and industrial effluents are discharged into the water, converting the Yamuna into a river of death. It is this absented river—heavy with toxic effluents and swathed with buoyant plastic debris—that appears in the contemporary artist Sheba Chhachhi's 2008 installation *The Water Diviner* (5.3). Seeping into *The Water Diviner* via a lightbox transparency of a manuscript painting of Radha and her female companions immersed in the river Yamuna in Braj—a painting not dissimilar in concept to the sixteenth-century Isarda *Bhāgavata Purāna folio* with which we began—planetary geoaesthetics spills into our embattled present as trace, memory, and refraction.**

After the catastrophes of the Little Ice Age, through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial photography, pilgrimage maps, and votive paintings of Braj reveal further interplay between matter and life (5.1; 5.2). The continuing valence of earlier philosophies



5.2 Pilgrimage Center of Braj (Brij Kshetra), ca. 1930. Color lithograph printed by Bolton Fine Art Litho Press, Bombay, 25.4 × 35.5 cm. Repository: Author's Collection. Photo courtesy Julie Wolf.

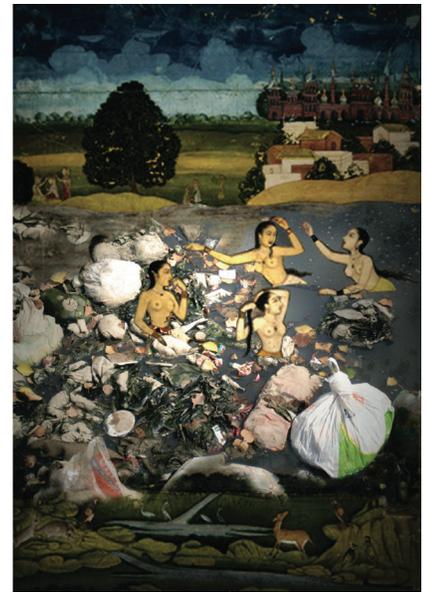
## UPCOMING PUBLICATION



SUGATA RAY &  
VENUGOPAL MADDIPATI  
Editors

### WATER HISTORIES OF SOUTH ASIA THE MATERIALITY OF LIQUESCENCE

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020



5.3 Sheba Chhachhi, *The Water Diviner*, 2008. Lightbox, 35.6 × 55.9 × 12.7 cm. Repository: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, Edition 1. Photo courtesy Sheba Chhachhi.

The Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS) at the University of California, Berkeley, one of the world's foremost institutes for research and programs on South Asia, works with faculty members, graduate students, community members, private institutions, and non-profit organizations to both deepen understanding of the region and create new generations of scholars of South Asia. South Asia Research Notes (SARN) is published by ISAS to promote dialogue and exchange between scholars who work in interdisciplinary fields related to South Asia, as well as to convey to the wider public the variety of exciting projects going on at Berkeley. It is published annually every Spring. Its e-version is available at [southasia.berkeley.edu/publications](http://southasia.berkeley.edu/publications).

— BOOK REVIEW —

*Over the last couple of decades a deepening awareness of human dependence on climatic stability has created a surge of interest among historians in earlier eras of climatic disruption. Much of this interest has been focused on the so-called Little Ice Age that peaked in the 17th and early 18th centuries.*

*This fascinating, and rapidly growing, body of work has tended, however, to be centered on certain specific themes and regions. Thematically the focus is usually on political issues, broadly speaking, rather than literature, culture and the arts. Geographically the focus is usually on Europe and North America, rather than, say, Asia or Africa.*

*This is why Sugata Ray's *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna 1550-1850* is doubly welcome: because it is focused on the art and architecture of the city of Mathura, in 'the enchanted world of Braj, the primary pilgrimage center in north India for worshippers of Krishna, (where) each stone, river and tree is considered sacred.'*

*Climate Change and the Art of Devotion is a wonderfully imaginative addition to the growing body of literature on the Little Ice Age. Sugata Ray traces the influence of climatic variations on South Asian art, architecture and devotional practices with extraordinary interpretive skill. This book is a must read for everyone with an interest in human responses to climate variability.*

*Amitav Ghosh, author*

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