



Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD)

History Seminar Series presents

Vaishnava jana to tene kahiye je:
Vaishnavas and others in Mughal Gujarat

Lecture by Samira Sheikh

Department of History, Vanderbilt University

Date: Friday, 11 January 2013

Time: 2.00 pm

Venue: AUD Kashmere Gate Campus, CR 11

About the speaker: Samira Sheikh is the author of *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200-1500* (OUP, 2010). She finished her doctoral work at the University of Oxford and is currently based at the Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. Her research interests include politics and religion in South Asia from 1200-1950, early modern trade, early Indian maps, and long-term relationships between Indian and Indian Ocean societies.

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in Mughal Gujarat

Abstract:

Gujarat under the Mughal Empire saw the rapid and largely unchecked rise of Vaishnavism, while Muslim minorities such as Shi'as and Isma'ilis suffered regular bouts of persecution. It was more pragmatic to 'become' Vaishnava than Muslim in Mughal Gujarat. The economy of religious change encompassed a range of groups - mercantile, agrarian, and even pastoralist. While many became Vaishnava, even more performed or imitated its characteristic vegetarianism and frugality as signs of social mobility. How and why did Vaishnavism flourish and find converts under one of the greatest Muslim empires of early modern times? The answer lies in regional political changes that facilitated the cultural dominance of merchants—a term that subsumes bankers, retailers, agents, and even bureaucrats—for whom early modern Vaishnavism offered a vocabulary for sectarian and cross-sectarian organization. Reverence for Vishnu in the form of Krishna, reinvented by the sectarian Pushtimarg and non-sectarian poets and propagandists since the late fifteenth century, had a malleable ideology that easily assimilated new adherents. Its vegetarianism, congregational worship, and temples seemed unthreatening to local Mughal authorities. It appealed to rulers as a doctrine of reform that would tame goddess-worshippers and turbulent forest people. The paper will chart this remarkably successful nexus between expansionist Vaishnavism, entrepreneurial politics, and the late Mughal state with particular reference to temple-building, and suggests how the nexus continues to be reinvented for present-day political purposes in Gujarat.