

DHARMA

ERC-FUNDED PROJECT ON SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN EPIGRAPHY

Annette Schmiedchen

The Centre d'études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (CEIAS) and the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), both based in Paris, the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU), and the university L'Orientale in Naples (UNO) will collaborate in a six-year research project granted by the European Research Council (ERC) as part of its "Synergy" scheme. The project *DHARMA: The Domestication of "Hindu" Asceticism and the Religious Making of South and Southeast Asia* has been launched in May 2019. The funds are awarded through the ERC's Research and Innovation Programme Horizon 2020. The three Principal Investigators are Emmanuel Francis (CEIAS), Arlo Griffiths (EFEO) and Annette Schmiedchen (HU).

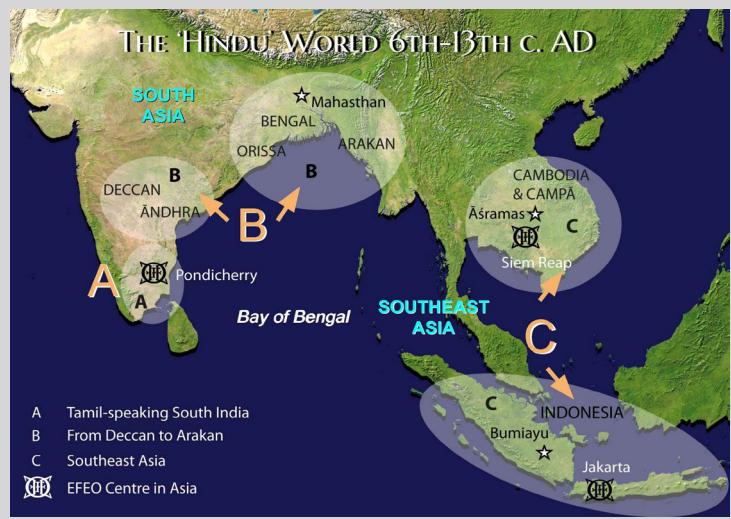
The project will focus on the religious systems subsumed today under the term "Hinduism". DHARMA will study the history of "Hinduism" in comparative perspective, focusing on the period from the 6th to the 13th century. During this period, the Bay of Bengal served as a maritime highway for intense cultural exchange. The resulting process of "Indianisation", marked notably by the spread of Indian religious ideas, of an Indian writing system, and of India's sacred language Sanskrit, touched large parts of South and Southeast Asia.

The Sanskrit word DHARMA can designate the cosmic law that is upheld by gods and humans. But it is also often used to refer to the numerous religious foundations made to support this law. The project seeks to understand the process of "institutionalisation" of "Hinduism" by investigating the roles of various agents, from kings and noblemen to priests, monks and local communities. It emphasises the social and material contexts of "Hinduism". This emphasis requires a multi-regional, multi-scalar and multidisciplinary methodology.

Our approach will be based on the correlation and contextualisation of written evidence from inscriptions and manuscripts, as well as material evidence from temples and other kinds

of archaeological sites. The study of inscriptions and archaeological sites will be carried out in three regional task forces: (A) Tamil-speaking South India, (B) From Deccan to Arakan, (C) Southeast Asia. A fourth, transversal task force (D) will focus on textual material transmitted in manuscript form.

South and Southeast Asian palm-leaf manuscripts preserve a rich textual archive relevant to the history of "Hinduism". These include descriptions of religious practices, as well as prescriptions that deal both with lay religiosity and with religious life in temples and monasteries. As for archaeological evidence, we are in an ideal position - thanks to the long-term collaboration between French and Asian archaeologists - to initiate surveys and contribute the data from excavated sites, which will enable us to confront our findings in the texts with the archaeological record. Inscriptions in Sanskrit and vernacular languages are the main sources for the history of pre-modern South and Southeast Asia. But they are not all accessible, even less so in a machine-processable format. For the large-scale comparative research that we propose to undertake, making as much as possible of South and Southeast Asian epigraphy available, in a digital database, is therefore a core objective of this project. Thus, the DHARMA project will create exciting new pathways to comparison across regions.



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About the Author:

Annette Schmiedchen is Guest Professor of Indology & History of South Asia at IAAW. Her special research interests are medieval Indian history and Sanskrit epigraphy.



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