Dr. Davesh Soneji
Associate Professor of South Asian Religions
McGill University

Performing Untenable Pasts:
Aesthetics and Selfhood in Kalāvantula Communities of Coastal Andhra, India

Tuesday, March 26, 2013
4:00pm
Bowden Hall 323
Emory University

This presentation examines the persistent yet invisible performance practices of former courtesans (kalāvantulu) in coastal Andhra Pradesh, South India, who have witnessed drastic social and political transformations of their communities over the past eighty-five years or so. Narrations of selfhood and identity among these women emerge through encounters with their dance and music repertoire which they are careful to preserve "behind closed doors" in the relative privacy of their homes. These iterations of repertoire that take place with some regularity among kalāvantula families are also the sites that produce personal and collective imaginations; identity and selfhood live through these mnemonic bodily practices. Outside the kalāvantula community, "courtesan dance repertoire" is read as a vestige of feudal history, a sign of the "backward" and aesthetically unsophisticated past that cannot be accommodated by contemporary public taste. For some women in courtesan communities today, however, the repertoire is used as a mode of telling; it is mobilized to consolidate an otherwise untenable identity. Deliberations on lineage, the devalued nature of their cultural practices, and their experiences of nonconjugal sexuality and institutionalized concubinage unfold through the performance of music and dance. Kalāvantula women express an ownership of the idea of the marginal; they articulate an awareness of the socio-aesthetics of their past. If we are to envision feminist ethnography as a project of documenting shifting subjectivities that are affected and transformed by a range of diverse articulatory practices, then memory-work with kalāvantula presents a productive site for such a project.

Co-sponsored by: Hightower Fund; Department of Religion; Graduate Division of Religion; Department of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies; Interdisciplinary Workshop in Colonial & Post-Colonial Studies