Invitation to propose a paper for:

Bhūta is a gHoSTly DemOn ('horror'), Bhūta IS also the PAST ('history')
VISUALISING HORROR IN THE HISTORY OF INDIAN ICONOGRAPHY

Concept note for a Conference on
15 March 2019 at
The School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU

All Indian mythic systems: Buddhist, Brahmanic, Islamic or Jain, have each developed concepts of hell, and a variety of ogres or demons that need to be vanquished. It is surprising that although there are many different books on Indian iconography, hardly anyone has put down the variety of images of demons and antiheroes in Indian art. Any study of iconography takes us into iconological concerns – the variety of contexts in which such images are used and what drove people to make them in the first place. When probing the definition of what is regarded as demonic in Indian art, we are reminded, that Indian religions seldom categorise deities in a binary way of good and evil. Rāvana is admired for his intelligence and Mahiṣāsura is well known as a valiant and worthy spouse. A *preta*, *bhūta* or *piśāca* may simply be the spirit of a much-loved deceased ancestor. Yet, each of these characters come from a realm which is also to be feared. An examination of their iconography opens up other germane questions, which arise when we study their development or evolution.

In their multiple incarnations within oral and textual traditions, they characterise the plurality of belief systems and are an equal repository of 'truth'. Through a study of these demons and their exorcisms, we can aid the construction of a more inclusive framework of the parallel practices and religious systems that animate Indian culture.

> "Demon": *ety.* Middle English: from medieval Latin, from Latin *daemon*, from Greek *daimōn*: 'deity, genius'. *Genius* comes from the same root as the Arabic *jinn*/ *jann*.

Similarly, the *shaitān*, deriving from the Old Testament Satan, is a fallen angel. The visual boundary between manifestations of divine and demonic, sacred and profane can often be blurred. Protective icons can sometimes be ferocious, wild, terrible and extremely grotesque in appearance, in fact no different than the forces or obstacles they are trying to annihilate. For instance, Vajrayogini, and the many Dākinis in Vajrayāna, or the older pan-Indian Devī's archetypal visualization in her demonic form, as the terrifying and monstrous Cāmuṇḍā are far from the acme of physical beauty with which feminine energies are otherwise associated. These warriors, guardians or protectors represent not only the darker and destructive side of nature, but (as in the case of Kāli) an innate compassion that is forced to manifest itself in the form of an extremely violent and horrific icon. Why is the demonic always a part of the Saptamātṛkā? Is the presence of the horrific necessary to complete the aesthetic bouquet of what is the divine whole? While classical *śāstrā*s on iconography have a simplistic binary understanding of *rūpa* as either something which is *ugra* or *saumya*, the aestheticians of *rasa* account for a variety of emotional registers. Can a re-reading of classical texts on iconography improve our presentation of the material?

Can we attempt to define the categories of demonic gods and ascetic demons through terms used in secular and sacred literature? For instance: can Mahākāla or Yamantaka, be regarded as examples of the former and can Rāvaṇa or Bali be examples of the latter? Do other deities like Indra and Brahma get turned into 'bad gods' while there can be categories of 'good demons'? Does this categorisation fail when good gods like Narasimha or Bhikṣāṭana take on a fierceness associated with the demonic: Viśvarūpa in the Bh. Gītā and Narasimha, Kāli, Rudra, Bhairava after all, defy common perceptions of divinity. Just because something looks fierce or is wrathful, it doesn't make it evil or demonic. Righteous anger is sanctified. When examining

Indian icons we need to therefore suspend the notion that demonic is evil, as the same qualities of fierceness are associated with goodness.

Wrathfulness is also the preserve of the deities of disease; and a large number of ancient Indian deities need propitiation: the wrath of Hāriti, Hidimba, Putanā, Mariamman, Jyeṣṭhā Ṣaṣṭhi, Sītalā, and the like, can steal foetuses, and rob parents of their progeny.

Examining the spaces they inhabit, and how those spaces are used, may also be informative. The *śmaṣāna*, or cremation ground, for instance, shrines of *pīr-s* where exorcisms are performed, or temples which demand anti-clockwise pradakṣinā would make appropriate case studies.

Rather like the contemporary debates on how one group's martyr is another's terrorist, one person's hero, is someone else's demon. Historians know that this depends on which side is constructing the narrative. Partha Mitter's study on *Much Maligned Monsters* revealed that Christian visions of demons coloured centuries of the modern West's perceptions of Indian deities. Conversely, in her recent lecture at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Susan Bean (*The Career of Clay in the Deccan*), discussed an image of Ganapati from the 1890s in which the god wrestles with demons who represent colonial overlords—a visual packed with multiple meanings. The idea of the foreigner or the fear of an atrocious enslaver is given the status of being a demon or barbarian other. An unchangeable past that you cannot escape is history, bhuta. Has it been given a visual form that is consistent with the language of mythology?

Are there certain recurring visual tropes on how the demonised are cast in India? We invite papers that examine this from the early historic period in South Asia.

Perhaps most interestingly, this conference also aims to reveal examples of how one community demonises another on the one hand, while one community also inherits the shape and vocabulary of the fearful demons of another. Are there stereotypes? And are Hindu stereotypes different from Islamic, Buddhist or Jain ones? Are we united in our demons even if we celebrate different gods?

The demon of the fine print:

This is a visual studies conference but open to all; we invite academics, and all MPhil or PhD research scholars to send their abstracts. Arranged on a shoestring budget, we cannot, regrettably afford transportation or accommodation in JNU. But we will be delighted to have you for lunch. Places are limited, so please register.

Abstracts and correspondence may be addressed to Dr. Naman P Ahuja at: mulladopiaza@gmail.com. Abstracts must be sent by March 1st, 2019. Those who wish to attend, but not present must also register at the same address in advance.

Some readings:

Bhattacharya, N N. *Indian Demonology: The Inverted Pantheon,* Manohar Publishers, Delhi 2000

Blackburn, S.H. 'Death and Deification: Folk Cults in Hinduism', *History of Religions*, vol. 24, no. 3 (February 1985), pp. 255–74.

Linrothe, Rob: *Demonic Divine : Himalayan Art and Beyond,* Serindia Publications, 2004

Linrothe, Rob *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art,* Serindia Publications, 1999

Mitter, Partha*, Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art,* Oxford University Press (The Clarendon Press), 1977.

O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger*, Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology,* Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi 1976.