



Vijaya Nagarajan (1961-Present)

Associate Professor of Religion and
Environmental Studies
University of San Francisco

"Get some mentors! It makes all the difference in the world." Vijaya Nagarajan, 2006.

Overview

Professor Vijaya Nagarajan teaches courses on Hinduism, Religion and Environment, Spiritual Autobiography, and Community Internships. Her scholarship has centered on the multivalent meanings in the kolam, a women's ritual art in southern India. She is currently working on her book, *Feeding a Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual and Art in southern India—The Kolam* (Oxford University Press). Her other research projects include: *On the Languages of the Commons; Tree Temples, Mangroves and Temple Forests; and Twins and Hinduism in the California Diaspora*. She has been active in the American Academy of Religion and in the environmental movement in India and the United States. She has written many publications including the following articles:

- Nagarajan, Vijaya. "Rituals of embedded ecologies: drawing Kolams, marrying trees and generating auspiciousness." *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water, Harvard: Harvard University Press, pp453–468* (2000).
- Nagarajan, Vijaya Rettakudi. "The Earth as Goddess Bhu Devi: Toward a Theory of 'Embedded Ecologies' in Folk Hinduism." *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India. State University of New York Press, Albany* (1998): 269-296.
- Nagarajan, Vijaya. *Origins of Hindu Social System*. Dattsons, 1994.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Early Life

Vijaya Nagarajan, the first of Raj and Pichammal Nagarajan's three daughters, was born in a small village in India. Her family moved to the U.S. when she was five, moved back to India four years later, only to return to the United States in another two years when she was eleven when her father's job was transferred yet again. Nagarajan describes the natural world as a subtle thread connecting the different experiences she had growing up in both India and the U.S. She has particularly vivid memories of being in her grandparents' southern Indian villages for many summers, where she experienced a certain kind of "agricultural rhythm of life" filled with slow moving oxen carts, domestic stone tools for crushing rice, lentils, and spices, and living outside the assumptions

of modern life. Green rice fields dominated the larger landscape—memories she would later contrast with her urban, park-filled life in Delhi and Washington, D.C. Nagarajan reflects that the vibrant questions of culture, economics, and ecology that she ponders and teaches about today are rooted in her bicultural childhood and adult experiences, steeped in the powerful landscapes of India and America.

Nagarajan's interest in the natural world also developed through her relationship with a childhood friend in Maryland. This friend's older sister studied wildlife biology at Humboldt State University and passed along her love of the natural world to her sibling, who shared it with Nagarajan. It was further echoed and reverberated by the very active environmental movements surrounding her. Nagarajan and her friend would often take walks together while trying to identify plants and flowers along the way, discussing the importance of recycling, and so on. However, there were no high school classes offered in environmental studies at that time and Nagarajan planned on going to college to become an engineer.

In the late 1970s, Nagarajan spent the first two and a half years of college at the University of Maryland, where she was one of the few female engineering students in the honors program. She would continuously ask her professors questions about the impact of engineering designs on social equity and the environment, but as there was not yet a field of environmental engineering, she was told her questions were outside the field. Soon after, she would continuously ply her professors with questions about the short-term and long-term impact of engineering designs on social equity, culture, and the environment

Halfway through her studies at Maryland, Nagarajan was given the opportunity to transfer to University of California at Berkeley, where there was a College of Natural Resources in addition to a program in environmental economics. Nagarajan felt that this track was a better reflection of her true interests and subsequently transferred to Berkeley. There, she learned a tremendous amount through her work with her advisor, Richard Norgaard. In the summer of 1981, he helped her find an internship in applied technology at the Murugappa Chettiar Research Center in India under the direction of C. V. Seshadiri, one of the leading philosopher-engineers in India. Her time at the Murugappa Chettiar Research center focused on the relationship between methane digester plants (or bio-gas plants) and the questions of "untouchability," "caste and cowdung" an experience she describes as "transformative."

Career

After graduating from UC Berkeley in 1983 with a Bachelor's of Science degree in Political Economy of Natural Resources, emphasizing in food security and agricultural development issues, Nagarajan worked at Friends of the Earth for six months as a consultant for the UN Nairobi Conference on alternative energy, women, and technology, then at Friends of the Ganges for nearly two years. Here, she organized public educational events to help publicize the plight of the polluted river, Ganges. She researched alternative sewage systems, reported and documented on them. She also worked on a Native American Art project, where she travelled with a team of researchers and interviewed leading Native American Indian painters. In 1985, she presented and lectured on the *kōlam*, a women's ritual art performed with wet and dry rice flour on the thresholds of households at the Smithsonian's Festival of Folklife in Washington DC during the Festival of India.

To pull together some of these diverse threads she was weaving into a coherent intellectual life, she also produced her own slide lecture: "Cow Dung, Caves and the Ganges: 'Environment' in the Indian Imagination" which tied her work on cow dung, "un-touchability", and biogas plants; sacred geography, temples, and space in Hinduism; complex issues of ritual purity, pollution and ecology in the Ganges; and the multi-disciplinary understanding of the *kōlam*. From 1985-1988, she travelled and presented this lecture at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University; Anadeges, Mexico City, Mexico; University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; University of California, Berkeley and many other places. She believes now that it may have been

one of the first interdisciplinary environmental lectures tying together Indian mythology, ritual, art and technology.

“I tacked back and forth between manual labor and environmental research jobs for environmental organizations,” she recalls. “I worked at a yeast factory, carpenter’s furniture-making business, and house-painting. I ended up going back to grad school, with my interests in ecology in the back of my head.” Nagarajan stayed at Berkeley for her graduate studies, where her research combined women, ritual, folklore and anthropology, art, and ecology. Though she did not have any formal focus on environmental studies/science in graduate school, she continued to build on her undergraduate and activist experience in the field. Most of her research papers centered on ecological topics such as on *yakshis*, tree goddesses, in ancient Indian art; ritual pollution in Indian folklore; the *kōlam*, the women’s ritual art tradition; and ancient Tamil landscape poetics.

In 1984, Nagarajan and her husband, Lee Swenson, created the Recovery of the Commons Project to create a community space for dialogue on questions related to literature, environment and power. Over the next twenty years they organized and hosted countless workshops, conferences, and small group dialogues with a number of well-known philosophers, poets and writers. Two years later, in 1986, Nagarajan and Swenson founded the Institute for the Study of Natural and Cultural Resources. These projects were ongoing while Nagarajan was in graduate school and beginning work on her scholarly career. “I was always working two jobs,” she notes, “one paid by a graduate scholarship, and one unpaid in salary, but expenses-paid. It is the energy of youth, I suppose, where working over a hundred hours a week felt as nothing special. I look back astonished at my own immense energy and devotion to issues larger than myself.”

Nagarajan received her doctorate in South Asian language and literature with an emphasis in anthropology and art history in 1998; she had been hired at the University of San Francisco (USF) the previous year. Shortly after arriving at USF, a meeting was called for those interested in forming an Environmental Studies department. Nagarajan was involved in the new department from its foundation and to this day, she and other interested faculty continue to hold monthly meetings. In that same year, Nagarajan also had the opportunity to attend a conference on religion and ecology at Harvard. The ecology sub-specialization that she had been thinking about for so many years was beginning to develop as a recognized discipline, and ecology became her specialization within religious studies.

Nagarajan has been a professor of Religion and Environmental Studies at USF for the past seventeen years. She teaches world religions and ecology; her course material focuses on how nature is imagined and structured through world cultures and religions, and how those ideas can have both positive and negative impacts on the environment itself. Her major research project will focus on tree temples, sacred groves and the commons in southern India, and will consist of three potential volumes: literature, anthropological discourses and environmental policy implications.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

The philosopher Ivan Illich was Nagarajan’s intellectual mentor up until the time of his death in 2002. “He was a genius,” Nagarajan says. “I was always in awe of him. He took a special interest in my work, and would spend hours discussing it with me. He paid attention, and that really helped me to know that he was interested in knowing what I was thinking about something.” Dick Norgaard, Nagarajan’s advisor at Berkeley, was another important mentor. Despite the fact that theirs was a more formal advisor/advisee relationship, he had a big impact on the direction of her studies and developing interests. “I saw him for an hour a semester, during our formal advising time,” Nagarajan recalls. “I remember him asking me, ‘What is your dream? What do you want to do for the summer?’” She desperately wanted to study in India, and Norgaard helped her to find a project

there as well as find some loan funding. Norgaard was a “bridge-maker” to what would become Nagarajan’s first active environmental research project.

Contributions

One of Nagarajan’s career highlights to date was her 2001 fellowship in the Women’s Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School. She describes her experience there as “extremely special,” and is still in touch with some of the graduate students in that department. Her time at Harvard also allowed her to work on her manuscript (tentatively entitled *Drawing Down Desires: Women, Ritual and Ecology in India---the Kolam*), which she hopes to finish within the next year. This too will be a major highlight.

Amongst Nagarajan’s most significant achievements is her ability to combine a successful professional life with family—she has been able to “do the dance” with a full-time career and professional life, while maintaining a close relationship with her husband and young twin daughters. On a more professional level, Nagarajan is very proud of having organized the Voice, Memory and Landscape lecture series at USF in 1999. The series brought 9 prominent speakers, including Arundhati Roy, Catherine Sneed, Ivan Illich, Peter Matthiessen and Maxine Hong Kingston to campus; audiences numbered as high as 1000 people. “It felt good to put that out there,” Nagarajan remembers. “People still remember it; it was the most amazing series of public discourses from leading intellectuals and writers.”

Nagarajan describes the period after she graduated from college as the lowest point of her career. This was because she sought an environmental career, but could not find out how to have one without working for an oil company. The fact that the environmental science/economics track at her college was geared toward making money made her search especially difficult. “It was frustrating because I couldn’t find a foothold,” she remembers. “I couldn’t find any mentors, and I didn’t know how to talk to people about job possibilities at that time.”

Though Nagarajan had a degree from a prestigious university, she did not know that she was supposed to—or even that she could—have a mentor. Since then, she has found her mentors by accident or through “serendipitous” interactions with people. “People who know [the benefits of a mentor] at an early age really have a head start,” she notes. Looking back on her experience, Nagarajan can see how having several strongly engaged, interested mentors when she was in college would have been an enormous help—especially as a minority in the environmental field. “I know few environmental professionals in my field who are minorities—that was also hard,” she says. Even today, Nagarajan sometimes finds herself the only or one of a few persons of color at environmental/activist events, and it feels very strange to her. “You don’t feel the same, you don’t connect...because you’re not from the same background,” she says.

Advice to Young Professionals

Nagarajan’s love of the natural world, and her sense of deep sadness at its continued depletion, is what motivates her to stay with a career in the environmental field. “It doesn’t feel like something I ‘stick with’,” she says. “It’s just something that *is*.” Nagarajan advises minorities who are considering a career in the environmental field to be persistent despite any obstacles they may come across, and perhaps most importantly: “Get some mentors! It makes all the difference in the world.”

For More Information

Phone: 415-422-5837

Email: nagarajan@usfca.edu

Website: www.usfca.edu/faculty/vijaya-nagarajan