

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BELIEF NARRATIVES IN FOLKLORE STUDIES: NARRATING THE SUPERNATURAL

**Guwahati, India, 6–8 February 2019**

This year's BNN conference was organised by Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture (Assam), with Dilip Kumar Kalita in front, and the Belief Narrative Network of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research, in the city of Guwahati, Assam, India. The conference was dedicated to the memory of two recently deceased prominent Indian folklorists: Professor Praphulladatta Goswami and Dr Promod Chandra Bhattachary.

The conference focused on the belief narrative in which traditional folk beliefs in the supernatural are given shape (and often credence) in popular narratives that (in the past) tended to be passed on in oral form. They are nonetheless not limited to the sphere of the folk legend, but can also result in new forms of behaviour, such as rumour-spreading, prejudice, witch-hunts and/or activities (even sacrifices), even in short folklore forms such as riddles and proverbs, designed to protect people from the influences in question, even in our own time. This conference aimed to give researchers the opportunity to share, discuss, and engage with a range of aspects related to the nature and role of belief narratives past and present.

Within three days, the conference had nine sessions with subtopics: Beliefs and the Supernatural; Beliefs and the Lore of Saints; Beliefs and Witch Hunting; Contemporary Belief Narratives (urban legends, the play on belief narratives by politicians, and so on); Beliefs and Vernacular Practices; Beliefs, Faith and Fear; Beliefs and Sacrifice. Altogether there were 74 presentations; half of them came from India, including many prominent students who focused mainly on different belief practices.

The session on beliefs and the supernatural discussed supernatural punishments, belief and disbelief, children's supernatural beliefs, the role of healers, ghosts, superpowers in folktales, and vernacular knowledge. The session on beliefs and the lore of saints dwelt upon the dimensions of Buddhism, godly spirits, saints, architectural places connected with beliefs, transformations into wild animals, and weather beliefs, while the session on beliefs and witch hunting focused on exorcism, witch phenomenon, and persecutions. The session on contemporary belief narratives was most diverse: the topics ranged from Mesopotamian myths and narrating supernatural to fake news with vampirism, Muslim martyrs in modern media, belief narratives among dancers and musicians, and functions of memorates on a local level. There were many different vivid presentations on contemporary belief narratives in local areas. The session on beliefs and vernacular practices discussed healing practices, riddles, symbolic meanings, and taboos, while the sessions on beliefs, faith, and fear, and that on beliefs and sacrifices focused more on local Indian phenomena and rituals.



*Inauguration ceremony of the ISFNR Belief Narrative Network (BNN) Conference in the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, Guwahati. Opening speech by the organising secretary Professor Dilip Kumar Kalita. Photograph Piret Voolaid 2019.*

During the conference the 2018 student prize for the best paper in belief narratives was awarded to Kikee D Bhutia (India) for her paper titled “*I Exist Therefore You Exist, We Exist Therefore They Exist*”: *Narratives of Mutuality between Deities (yul lha gzhi bdag) and lhopo (Bhutia) Villagers in Sikkim.*

Guwahati welcomed the conference participants with the beginning of spring flow and kind temperatures. The hosts treated the conference participants to delicious food and drink and an excellent cultural programme, presenting different Indian dances and music on both evenings.

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