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Einladung zum Vortrag

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A 16th Century Hindu Goddess in the 21st Century

Nepal's Goddess Svasthani

During her relatively short tenure in Nepal's Hindu pantheon (16th century to the present), the goddess Svasthani has cultivated a notably ambiguous identity and elusive presence among her divine associates and human devotees. Despite her popularity evidenced by the annual month-long recitation of her narrative text and observance of her ritual tradition, Svasthani is nearly invisible both within and outside of her own tradition. That is, in addition to being virtually unheard of outside of Nepalese Hindu communities, she is all but physically absent in the narrative tradition of the Svasthani Vrata Katha and her tradition as a whole is historically characterized by a conspicuous lack of iconography and other physical or artistic representations of the goddess.

It is therefore significant that in this same short period since the 16th century, Svasthani has undergone two major transformations with important implications for her identity and interaction with devotees. In this talk I explore these critical shifts within the Svasthani tradition that mark her gradual but meaningful transformation from a bodiless, invisible, unfixed, private aniconic figure into an embodied, visible, fixed, public protector goddess. I employ Svasthani as a case study for thinking about the process of becoming a goddess and, more specifically, an embodied goddess, and ask what is lost and gained in this transformation. In mapping out these shifts, I will demonstrate that Svasthani's body, her physicality, is peripheral to her tradition, and ask what significance this has for understanding her, the history and future of her tradition, and the dynamics of gender, power, and place in the Hindu tradition more broadly.