



## Invitation ZMO-Kolloquium WS 2008/09

### “Speaking, Listening, Reading, Seeing – Shaping the World Through Media”

Thursday, 29 January 2009, 6 pm

### Play It Again Saraswathi: Gramophone and Religion in Colonial South India

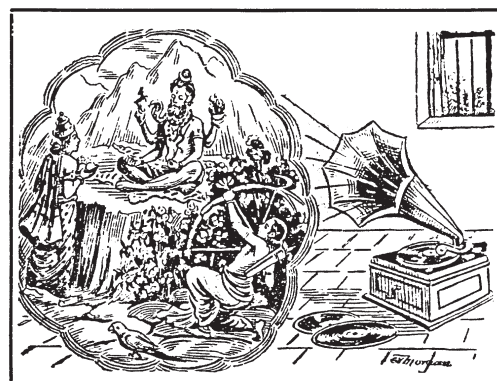
Lecture by Dr Stephen Putnam Hughes

#### Venue

Zentrum Moderner Orient  
Kirchweg 33

14129 Berlin

For at least a decade from the late 1920s into the 1930s the local gramophone trade, through their choice of music recordings, advertising, and record catalogues, enacted a conspicuous articulation of media technology as religious practice. I argue that the introduction and commercial success of the gramophone, especially during the interwar period, was predicated upon a religious address which sought to



imbued the recorded music and its public within a spiritual devotion to music. In particular the Hindu goddess of music, Saraswathi, became a key trope for representing both the recording technology and commercial institutions of the rapidly growing gramophone industry in south India. South Indian gramophone companies tried to mark their new medium as part of a Hindu vernacular. In this sense the mechanical reproduction and commercial exploitation of religious songs was represented as continuous with other forms of popular religion. This was not just a matter of traditional religious practices being captured by modern media technologies. Nor was this a rupture of religious tradition or a negation of sacred art. This was a more complex encounter. The gramophone worked to save, protect and promote religious traditions, while displacing and changing them at the same time. The gramophone was embedded within a religious repertoire in such a way as to embrace, domesticate, and harness its technology as a kind of Hinduism. Yet the material inscription and commercial circulation of Hindu devotional records also helped reorganize both public and private access and availability of religious music performance. The gramophone not only built upon and extended the vernacular experience of Hinduism, it also enabled a new set of constraints and possibilities for a addressing a new media public.

GEFÖRDERT VOM



Bundesministerium  
für Bildung  
und Forschung

**Dr Stephen Putnam Hughes** completed both MA and PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology at The University of Chicago. He is currently teaching in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where he is the Director of Studies for the MA programme in the Anthropology of Media.

Hughes research is at the intersection of anthropology, history, religion and media and film studies. Tamil-speaking south India is his main ethnographic and linguistic area of specialization. He has lived and worked in south India for over six years since 1987 on various research projects relating to the history and ethnography of media including Tamil cinema, film exhibition, film music, gramophone, radio, popular publishing, election campaigns and the emergence of satellite TV. Hughes also has strong interests in visual anthropology including documentary and ethnographic film and photography.