

TALK TITLE:

## **India's "Religious Suicides" and the Legal-Secular Question**

TALK ABSTRACT:

My talk addresses a central question — what happens when a traditional religious practice conflicts with modern secular law — as it looks at the tensions that arise when a religious tradition endorses the self-extinguishment of human life in a legal system that treats suicide as a criminal offence. It explores the doctrinal-scriptural, ethical, medico-legal and sociological aspects of *Santhara* — a Jain practice in which a person fasts unto death — and examines how religion, law and constitutional secularism intersect in the ongoing debate outside the courtroom and in the litigation over the legality of the practice. I argue that, irrespective of how the Indian courts may rule in the matter, *Santhara* remains a classic example of the law-religion conflict, and provides an ideal template for debating the question of reconciling individual freedom as well as a minority community's religious rights with the justification for state intervention in matters of religion.

SPEAKER BIO:

*A Mumbai, India-based columnist, law professor and film-maker, Shekhar Hattangadi started as a news reporter and became at 24 the youngest person to helm a nationally circulated publication in India. After a mid-career dual master's degree in International Politics and Journalism from Ohio University and a Public Policy fellowship at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, he returned to journalism as Associate Editor of McGraw-Hill Publications in New York and later as its Mumbai Correspondent. Shekhar then enrolled at film school and also got a law degree, topping Mumbai University with three gold medals. Shekhar has since then taught law, practised it pro bono, and used its principles to write his columns. He now deploys his cinematic skills to make documentaries on controversial religious practices. His award-winning film SANTHARA: A Challenge to Indian Secularism? is the first of this series.*

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