

**Circulating the Social:
Literacy Activists and Feminism
in South Asia**

Dr. Francis Cody

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11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Hortense Amsterdam House (2110 G St.) 202

FRANCIS CODY (Ph.D. University of Michigan 2007) is an assistant professor in the Anthropology and Asian Institute, University of Toronto, who studies the modern politics of written language in the Tamil region of southern India. His book *The Light of Knowledge: Literacy and Activism in Southern India*, an ethnographic study of a mass-literacy movement in rural Tamilnadu, is under review at Cornell University Press. This work examines the literacy activists of the Arivoli Iyakkam (Enlightenment Movement). The movement began in the early 1990s, when rural activists working with the state attempted to inculcate a scientific mentality and a corollary sense of secular agency among villagers through literacy lessons. Cody's research was focused on how written language emerged as the central technology of neoliberal "empowerment" in contemporary pedagogies of enlightenment aimed at village women. The literacy movement was caught in a paradox insofar as it sought to remake the very people it aimed to emancipate. And yet, it also became clear that problems emerging in the practices of mobilization and pedagogy led literacy activists to think critically about their own approaches to language, gender, and politics.