

Oxford Centre for Vaishnava and Hindu Studies

Trustees Report for the period ended December 2001

The trustees present their report and accounts for the year ended 31st December 2001.

Trustees

Mr Ross Andrew, Mrs Sharmila bhattacharya-Ford and Mr Shaunaka Rishi Das have served as trustees throughout the year.

The Trust Deed of the Charity governs appointment of trustees. The Board of Trustees is authorised to appoint new trustees to fill vacancies arising through resignation or death of an existing trustee. The Charity's trustees are named on page one of the document.

Investment powers

The Trust Deed authorises the trustees to authorise any investments comprised in the trust fund to be held in the name of any clearing bank, trust corporation or stock-broking company which is a member of the Stock Exchange as nominee for the trustees, although no such investments are presently held.

Constitution, objects and policies

The OCVHS is constituted by a Trust Deed and its objects are the advancement of education in the field of Vaishnava Studies and Hindu Studies.

The Centre ended the year in a healthy financial position, an increase in the student population and having attracted two substantial grants for academic projects. It also increased its lecturing and tutoring for the University, its population of visiting scholars and its relationship with the Indian and Hindu communities.

Development, activities and achievements

British Oral History Project Launched

The OCVHS British Hinduism Oral History Project was officially launched at the Indian High Commission, London on Tuesday, 27 March 2001.

This important Project will form the first permanent record of the cultural and historical life of Hindus in Britain. It will involve 300 volunteer interviewees from the first generation Hindu community in Britain. The archive will be held at the OCVHS.

The results of this project will be compiled into a touring exhibition. The project is being managed by Shaunaka Rishi Das as Project Director, Prof. Kim Knott of Leeds University as Academic Co-ordinator, and Hari Vaudrey as Treasurer. Miss Shalini Sharma has been recruited to carry out and transcribe the interviews under Prof. Knott's supervision.

Those attending included the High Commissioner himself, Members of Parliament, noted academics and prominent members of the Hindu religious and business community.

Keynote speakers were HE Nareshwar Dayal, Indian High Commissioner, Lord Addington, Peter Luff, MP, O. P. Sharma, MBE (National Council of Hindu Temples), Dr. Gillian Evison (Indian Institute Library) and Helen Jackson (Heritage Lottery Foundation).

The launch also attracted a great deal of media attention with journalists from the BBC World Service, Eastern Eye, Sunrise Radio, India Monitor, Indian Express, Asian Age and History Today in attendance. The BBC 'South Today' programme also featured a news item on the Project in its evening bulletin the following day.

Lord Dholakia, a member of the Centre's Patron's Board said 'I am delighted that the OCVHS is undertaking such a project. There is a danger that a significant portion of history may be lost forever, if we fail to record the recollections and contributions made. This has my full support.'

Prof. Kim Knott is the project's Research Co-Ordinator. Her extensive work on the Hindu community in England led her to recognise the importance of establishing such an archive. A major portion of the project is being funded by a grant of £86,200 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Speaking on behalf of the Fund, Helen Jackson, Deputy Director of Research commented: 'We feel the project has huge model value for other communities. There's no denying the strategic and important vision behind the Oral History Project and the work of the Centre.' She added that the 'ground breaking and much needed project' was exactly the sort of undertaking the Lottery wanted to fund.

In his opening speech, HE Nareshwar Dayal said: 'This project — The Life of Hindus in Britain — will mark the beginning of an important process of documenting that which makes pluralistic United Kingdom a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural democracy.' Peter Luff, MP paid tribute to the HLF for supporting 'something of such cultural and political importance.' He also rejoiced in 'the confidence you will give the new generation from understanding their roots and their origin'. He also remarked on how well the Project fitted in with the Centre's own aims.

O. P. Sharma, President of the National Council Hindu Temples (NCHT), stated that the project was very much needed. Mr. Sharma, who was recently awarded an MBE for services to the Hindu community, affirmed that the NCHT would be supporting it wholeheartedly. 'This project will do justice to us,' he said.

Lord Addington, who officially launched the project, emphasised the need to learn from the past in order to grow in the future. He spoke of the Hindu community's experiences as being an integral part of Britain's history. 'It's about our own past and how we integrate people into it.'

The launch was hailed by all present as an enormous success. This was in no small way due to the wonderful hospitality, warmth and efficiency shown by HE Nareshwar Dayal, P. C. Haldar and the rest of the staff at the High Commission, for which the Centre is extremely appreciative.

Hindu Youth Festival 2001

The Hindu Youth Festival 2001, which was originally planned to promote awareness of the OCVHS among young Hindus in Britain, turned into a ten-day festival and mela attracting 70,000 people. It was a great success.

With the support of the Hindu religious community and business leaders, the youth were facilitated to explore issues of Hindu identity in Britain today, as well as social, moral and political issues, and to become conscious of the need to plan their own future.

The organisers of the youth events came from all backgrounds and represented every denomination and major Hindu youth group in the country. Historically it was the first time

that these groups had ever worked together, and this is where the greatest achievement of the Festival lies.

The young people, who in the next ten or fifteen years will be the leaders of their communities around the country, worked together as one unit, setting aside sectarian identities, confronting their personal agendas and developing trusting and affectionate relationships.

They succeeded in providing nine evenings of interactive debate, discussion, dialogue, plays, lectures, multi-media presentations and lots of fun. The dynamic of relationships built up during these events was testing both to courage and sincerity but has provided an important foundation for future growth within the community.

The OCVHS was able to facilitate this because of its non-sectarian, non-political yet scholarly ethos, and we were very pleased with the positive results. The youth themselves are very enthusiastic to take the initiative forward and build on it for the future. Meetings will be held about this over the coming months.

The festival received welcome support from those within and outside the Hindu Community. In his statement, the Prince of Wales emphasised that: 'This event will help strengthen the multi-cultural and multi-faith society in which we live. By endeavouring to explore and define your own tradition within British culture, you are also helping our country to define its own identity'.

Prime Minister Tony Blair added: 'This event provides British Hindus with an important opportunity to explore their culture and their faith. It will also give the participants an opportunity to discuss what it means to be a young Hindu in Britain today.' Messages of support were also received from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Atmasvarupa Swami, Bhakti Charu Swami, Tejomayananda Swami, Muniji, HE Nareshwar Dayal, the Indian High Commissioner, Lord Dholakia, OBE and Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London.

The Festival attracted an impressive amount of media coverage. It was covered by BBC and ITV television broadcasts as well as local and national radio, including live broadcasts for BBC Radio 5 Live and the BBC World Service. Stories and pictures also appeared in the London Times, the Guardian, Times of India, India Abroad and all the British Asian media.

We would like to thank the young organisers and the 250 volunteers for their dedication and commitment. The OCVHS would particularly like to thank Mr. Arjan Vekaria for his inspirational and practical role in developing the Festival, Mr. Gopalbhai Popat for his wise counsel and experience, Kirit and Meena Pathak for their patronage of the event, Sri Rameshbhai Oza for the wonderful Bhagavat Katha he delivered over a period of nine days, Shrastri-ji and his priests for the Mahavisnu Yajna and Muniji, Bhakti Charu Swami and Atmasvarupa Swami for their inspiration and courage of leadership.

Digital *Shikshapatri* Project

In a joint venture with the Indian Institute Library, Oxford, the OCVHS has been awarded a significant grant of £105,000 from the Government's New Opportunities Fund. This grant will be used to fund the digitalisation of the Bodleian Library's *Shikshapatri* manuscript (the most revered scripture of the Swaminarayan movement).

Each year the Bodleian Library welcomes hundreds of visitors for *darshan* of the manuscript. The Library is aware of the manuscript's importance to the Swaminarayan community both in the UK and worldwide. Because of this, Oxford University, in collaboration with the OCVHS, decided to put in a bid to the NOF.

The project will develop a computerised learning resource based on the digitised images of the *Shikshapatri* and its history. It is planned to make this available over the Internet twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

It is hoped that this will be the first stage in a long-term project to encourage young scholars from the Swaminarayan community to research their own tradition. They can then use this cutting-edge technology to transmit their findings worldwide. The project will be officially launched in January 2002.

The Hindu Youth Survey

The Hindu Youth Survey, the first of its kind ever attempted, developed with the Hindu Youth Festival programme and was headed up by Romila Shantosh and Savita Banot. Both worked very hard to produce a sixteen page questionnaire with the help of OCVHS Academic Advisory Board members Prof. Kim Knott, Dr. Malory Nye and Dr. Eleanor Nesbitt.

A host of young volunteers enabled the team to achieve 500 completed survey questionnaires and fifteen hours of group interviews. The team also received two hundred requests from respondents to take part in future research.

This material now needs to be input and analysed in such a way that it is of use to the Hindu community, including religious and community leaders and the youth themselves. Analysis will be used to formulate future plans that are appropriate to the needs, interests and concerns of the present generation.

Some of the responses received were noteworthy, showing that Hindu youth in the UK claim not to understand the rituals of their tradition — neither the reason behind them, nor the content. However, they do make clear that they are interested to learn about these. Language seems to be one of the major barriers in their religious education. They also point to lack of qualified teachers, where in many cases elders neither seem to know how nor have the time to communicate the significance of these rituals.

The majority of youth clearly do want more events such as the Hindu Youth Festival, and they liked the fact that the youth were able to organise the festival themselves.

Education has been pointed out as a major need in the community. The Oxford Centre wants to help facilitate gifted Hindu students in the study of their own tradition so that they may become learned, articulate and broad-minded representatives of their culture. To feed the intellectual, cultural and spiritual needs of the community now will ensure the preservation and continuity of the culture for the future. The OCVHS, through its association with Oxford is taking the lead in this higher-level education need.

Bhagavad-Gita in Hebrew

Congratulations to OCVHS D.Phil student Ithamar Theodor, who has recently secured a contract with a prestigious Israeli publishing house.

Jerusalem-based Carmel Publishers have agreed to publish *The Bhagavad-gita – A Theological Metaphysical Examination*, in which Ithamar argues that in order to accept the Gita as a philosophical and theological treatise, its three layers of meaning must be uncovered and understood.

The publication will include a full translation of the Gita, a commentary and a bibliographical review. It has received the full support of scholars from two major Israeli universities — The Hebrew University in Jerusalem and The Tel Aviv University.

This is the first academic translation and commentary on the *Bhagavad-gita* to be published in modern Hebrew.

Scholarship Fund

The Centre is delighted to announce the establishment of its first scholarship fund, thanks to a kind donation of Mr. Dave Dobson.

The first recipient of this award is Ithamar Theodor, who will receive £801 towards his doctorate studies. Congratulations to Ithamar and many thanks to Mr. Dobson for his generous contribution.

Rana Fellowship

The OCVHS set up a Fellowship to facilitate visiting scholars to the OCVHS. The fellowship was able to empower the Centre to invite two scholars to give lectures and tutorials on its behalf at Oxford University.

The award, known as the Rana Fellowship was established in honour of Dr. Diljit Rana, MBE. Dr. Rana, a prominent Northern Ireland businessman has, together with his wife Uma, been one of the Centre's most enthusiastic supporters from its inception. Dr. Rana also generously sponsored the production of the Centre's colour brochure at the end of last year.

Lectures and Seminars

The first recipients of this scholarship were Prof. Joseph O'Connell and his wife Dr. Kathleen O'Connell. Prof. O'Connell gave a series of eight lectures on behalf of the OCVHS at Oxford University during Trinity Term (May–June 2001). His subject was *Hindu Theism*, including discussions about devotional experience, the rituals of worship and the nature and contribution of Hindu theology.

In addition to these, Prof. O'Connell also gave a further three lectures on *Indian Perspectives on Ethics*. Each lecture focused on the approach taken by different strands of Hinduism — Brahmanic, Vaishnava and Jaina respectively.

As a follow-up to her two lectures on Rabindranath Tagore at the Centre last year — which were very well-received — Dr. K O'Connell gave a further two lectures this year. These looked at Tagore's approach to holistic education and his role as educator.

Prof. M. Narasimhachary from the University of Madras, on his second visit to Oxford, gave a series of eight lectures on *Vedic Religion*. The first four weeks focused on the teachings of the Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva Vedas, whilst the latter four looked at Ramanuja's interpretation of the Bhagavad-gita.

Dr. Guy Beck, a specialist in Indian religious music from the University of Tulane, USA, delivered a series of eight lectures titled *Hinduism and Music: Past and Present*. Topics included Hindu religious chant, Vaishnava devotional songs and ancient Indian music. He also conducted eight seminars at the Music faculty exploring world music with a special emphasis on India.

A series of two-weekly student-led seminars were held at the Centre last term. Ravi Gupta, Ken Valpey, Ithamar Theodor and Father Martin Ganeri presented their work for critical comment by their fellow students and Prof. Joseph O'Connell, Prof. Richard Gombrich and Dr. Sanjukta Gupta. It was unanimously agreed that these were a great success and a tremendous help to the students. It is therefore planned to continue with these next term.

Students

The OCVHS welcomed two new students this year. Amanda Jane Mills from South Africa and Travis Chilcott from the USA both began Masters degree courses in Religion at Oxford University in October. Travis is a recipient of the Clarendon Award, a scholarship award which has been made to him by the Theology Faculty of Oxford University.

Ravi Gupta, one of our three D. Phil students, obtained a full scholarship from the Theology Faculty. Ken Valpey, another D.Phil student, received a grant from the University's Max Mueller Memorial Fund for the six-month research project he is currently undertaking in India.

That three of the Centre's students have received major awards from Oxford University not only represents a tremendous achievement for the individuals themselves but is a testament to the Centre's commitment to academic excellence.

OCVHS Library

Michael Austin, completing a Master's degree at Harvard University, did an internship in Oxford this summer. He divided his time between the Bodleian Library and the OCVHS Library. Michael was able to index and organise the Centre's library collection, and we are very grateful for all his hard work.

Media Interest

As well as the publicity generated by the Oral History Project launch, the last few months have seen a marked increase in media interest in the Centre, especially from the BBC. OCVHS representatives have been asked to comment on a variety of issues ranging from the Kumbha-mela to world peace.

Programmes contributed to by the Centre so far include *Pause for Thought* (BBC Radio 2), *The Heaven & Earth Show* (BBC1) and *The Sunday Programme* (BBC Radio 4). The OCVHS has also been featured on the Oxford-based TV station, Channel 6.

Communications Strategy

To complement this rising media interest, the Centre has recently launched its own media communications strategy. As well as providing regular newsletters updating core supporters on developments, the Centre will also issue frequent press releases to major UK and Asian publications. The recent press release covering the granting of a Masters degree to our eighteen year-old student Ravi Gupta was widely reported in the Asian press, both in the UK and India.

Board of Governors Meeting and Dinner

The bi-annual Board of Governors meeting was held in June. During the meeting Mrs Neerja Sethi, was welcomed onto the Board of Governors. Neerja and her husband Bharat Desai run Syntel Inc., a very successful computer company in the USA.

The meeting was followed by a dinner held in the beautiful surroundings of the library room at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, which was attended by forty people, including representatives from the Indian High Commission, prominent Indian business people, senior academics from Oxford, Cambridge London and Leeds, and students.

OCVHS Fellowships awarded

The Board of Governors of the OCVHS granted its first fellowships in June of this year. Senior Associate Fellowships have been awarded to former academic directors Prof. Thomas Hopkins and Prof. Joseph O'Connell. Fellowships were awarded to Dr Sanjukta Gupta, Peggy Morgan and Dr. Gillian Evison. All of these fellowships were awarded in recognition of the tremendous amount of work done by the above mentioned scholars on behalf of the Centre since its inception in 1997.

Statement of Trustees responsibilities

The trustees are required to comply with their obligations under the Charities Act 1992 (or any statutory or modification of that Act) with regard to:

1. The keeping of accounting records for the Charity
2. The preparation of annual statements for the Charity
3. The auditing or independent examination of the statements of account of the Charity

4. The transmission of the statements of account of the Charity to the Commissioners.
The Trustees are also responsible for the preparation and submission of an annual report and return to the Charity.

Approval

This report was approved by the board of directors and trustees on _____ and signed on its behalf.

Trustee