

OXFORD CENTRE FOR HINDU STUDIES

Research Programme



A RECOGNISED INDEPENDENT CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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Introduction

The OCHS research programme seeks to support well-defined research in all areas in the study of Hindu culture.

It encourages both collaborative and individual scholarship that leads to significant advances in the understanding of cultures associated with Hinduism, disseminating their findings through clearly defined outputs.

It further aims to encourage a fruitful interaction with the public from grass-roots to policy-making and media sectors, with the goal of enhancing the culture and application of knowledge on the broadest scale.

The OCHS welcomes proposals for projects in all these areas.

Types of project

- Academic research projects with a thematic focus.
- Textual resource projects including translation, preservation, and archive projects.

OCHS research streams for 2008–9

Research projects at OCHS fall under four general headings, Hinduism and modernity, Classical Hinduism, Religious dialogue and interface, and Historical perspectives on Hindu cultures. Under each of these broad umbrellas OCHS seeks to promote collaborative research on specific projects.

1. Hinduism and modernity

This general category seeks to examine Hinduism in relation to modernity, particularly with respect to questions about the place of religion in the public sphere, questions of social hierarchy and equality, and Hinduism in relation to globalisation and localisation. Within this broad category research projects could deal with Hinduism and the plastic arts, Hinduism and politics, Hinduism and society, and Hinduism and literature.

Community archive projects

- Oral Histories
- Hindu Archive

2. Classical Hinduism

This is a general category for research projects that may be of a textual or historical nature, and may include the preservation and critical editing and translating of material relating to particular traditions. It also might include thematic studies of topics within Hinduism.

Śakta Traditions: History, Doctrine and Practice

Project Directors: Gavin Flood, Bjarne Olesen

Project Manager: Bjarne Olesen

Project Outline

Research in the Śaiva traditions have been quite extensively developed in recent

years. Important work has been done on the Skanda Purana, the Paśupatas, the Śaiva Siddhanta, the non-dualistic Śaiva traditions, and their philosophical articulation in the Pratyabhijna. But less work has been done on what might be called Śakta traditions, those traditions, tantric and non-tantric, focused on an independent Goddess (Devi) or on Śiva's power (*śakti*). Research has been done on the Kubjika tradition and on Śakta oriented Śaiva traditions but a sustained research programme that inquires into the history, doctrine and practices of what might be called 'Śaktism' is a desideratum.

The aim of this project is therefore to address fundamental questions such as the clarification of the distinction between the Śaiva and Śakta traditions, questions about Śakta textual lineages and their inter-relationship, the clarification of doctrines and practices of the different schools, questions about the relationship between the tantric and the puranic Goddess traditions, questions about the relationship between local Goddess traditions (such as the Teyyams in Kerala) and the pan-South Asian traditions, raising questions about the relationship between esoteric practices and the esoteric temple cults, asking what the delimitation of Śakta doctrine is, and what developments there are in contemporary Śakta worship. The conference would therefore have three or four focuses, a text-historical or philological focus (this would be the main one as the texts of the tradition and its text-historical boundaries are hardly established), an anthropological focus on contemporary practice, a doctrinal or theological focus on theological reflection based on the textual material that has been established to date, and an art-historical angle.

The project will be done in collaboration with the Study of Religions Department in the University of Aarhus.

Project Outputs

- An international conference to be held in Oxford.
- Publication of the papers from the conference as a volume in the Routledge Hindu Studies Series and/or in editions of the Journal of Hindu Studies.

3. Comparative philosophy and religion

Having developed out from the Theology Faculty, one of the concerns of OCHS has been comparative Theology. This research field intends to include comparative religion within its remit and seeks to examine the ways in which Hindu thought can interact with non-Hindu philosophies and theologies. This research area partly grows out of the successful comparative seminars and conferences held at OCHS between Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism and builds on the work of Prof F. X. Clooney who has written extensively on comparative theology.

Categories in Indian Philosophy project

Project Director: Gavin Flood

Project Manager: Jessica Frazier

Project Outline

This project explores the use of categories in Indian philosophy, including linguistic categories, aesthetic and emotional categories, universals and logical categories, metaphysical and ontological categories, and other possible processes of categorisation across different philosophical schools and diverse concepts. The goal is to shed a clear

light on the modes of reasoning in the Indian philosophical traditions, illuminating its relation to Western methods, and its unique contribution to philosophy across the globe.

One of the characteristic features of ancient and medieval philosophy both east and west has been its propensity to analyse existence into particular categories and make fine distinctions in different philosophical areas. This conference would focus on the way this process has operated in the Indian philosophical context. For example, in Buddhism the Abhidharma developed sophisticated categories for the analysis of mind, Samkhya for the analysis of experience, Nyaya Vaisheshika developed ontological categories, in Śaiva philosophy we have elaborate cosmological categories, and in early modern Vaishnavism we have the development of aesthetic categories applied in a religious context. We might even call this process of categorisation a philosophical style of thinking. The aim of this project is to address this question of categorisation and to raise questions about what precisely is entailed by categorisation, why it developed to such a high degree in the Indian context, and to raise philosophical questions about the relevance and success of such philosophical endeavour. The project therefore has a descriptive dimension – The exposition of categorisation in Indian philosophical traditions – and an evaluative or philosophical dimension – the critical inquiry into categories and their relevance to contemporary philosophy.

While there will be research on particular systems of classification, we hope that the project will generate discussion across diverse philosophical traditions in order to discuss categorisation as a feature of Sanskritic philosophy in the classical and medieval periods. We also envisage a comparative dimension in which parallel processes are considered from other philosophical traditions.

Project Outputs

- An international conference bringing together major scholars in the field.
- A conference volume, and/or publications in the Journal of Hindu Studies.

OCHS Religious Subjectivity Project

Project Directors: Gavin Flood, Jessica Frazier

Project Manager: Jessica Frazier

Project outline

The attempt to pin down and paint an accurate picture of the subjectivity of religious persons is a major contemporary project, and remains ongoing in connection with the search for more concise understandings of religion, adherence, interiority, and selfhood. The study of religion has taken a wide range of approaches to defining religious subjectivity: whether as structure of personal experience, reflexive concept of self, indexical marker of immediacy, thematisation of a perceived 'interiority', mediation between individual and tradition, or as a rhetorical strategy for defending or attacking notions of privacy and autonomy. Considerable work remains to be done in the phenomenological project of mapping subjectivity, and the need to chart this territory is strongly felt in the study of religions where researchers must frequently handle cultural 'signs' with an ill-defined relation to an 'inner' experience in which their purported 'meaning' may be thought to lie.

The OCHS Religious Subjectivity project aims to refine current models of religion

and the religious subject, and of the notions of religious meaning and experience which it entails, along with the hermeneutic methodologies on which it relies. It will do so through research, publication, and interdisciplinary and comparative collaboration, the proceedings of which will be made widely accessibly to the academic community through web and print access.

Project outputs

- Two book publications
- A project website disseminating lectures and research, and inviting networked discussion leading toward collaboration with other centres in Oxford and abroad.

4. Historical perspectives on Hindu cultures

The history of religion in South Asia is highly contested and has become a battleground for ideological conflict. But history is crucial for any understanding of religion, not only in the past but in the contemporary context. History might be seen both as a discourse about the past and the object of that discourse. This research trajectory seeks to raise questions about the nature of history in South Asia, questions about colonial vs non-colonial versions of history, and questions about how history relates to contemporary social, religious and cultural identities.

Hindu 'Archaeology and Text' Project.

Project Director: Himanshu Prabha Ray.

Project Outline

This project aims to contribute to an understanding of how sacred spaces came to be defined in the archaeological record from around the latter half of the first millennium BC onwards. It bridges the gap that exists between textual studies and archaeology through a focus on the Hindu temple, and aims to take the initiative to overcome these disciplinary rigidities by inviting scholars from a range of academic specialisations to lead the way, both in terms of developing new research methodologies, but more significantly in pioneering changes in pedagogy for studying a crucial element in the understanding of Indian culture, viz. the temple itself, and the concrete and performative actualisation of texts in the life of the temple.

Theistic developments in the Indian subcontinent have often been seen as later overlays on what has been termed the portable ideational religion of the Vedas concerned largely with sacrifices and rituals. The key concept here is the notion of religious spots as being mobile as opposed to these being defined in terms of specific locales and geographic places. The location of the temple at a defined spot indicated a change in its relationship with the community that provided patronage and maintained it. No doubt, the temple was a manifestation of philosophic and religious changes and by the early centuries of the Christian era emerged as the most important feature of the landscape. On account of its location and appeal within the community, the temple provided a platform for creativity in terms of literary compositions inscribed on its walls, as well as in dramatic enactment and recitation performed in its precincts. The temple thus evolved as a crucial link between the ruling elite and the community and through its wider linkages in the overall sacred geography connected to other major shrines, cult spots and centres of pilgrimage extending beyond political frontiers.

The project focuses on a number of key themes including: The Archaeology of the Temple; Texts and Religious Action; Asceticism and the Bhakti Tradition, and; Performance and Text. It engages leading scholars from India, Canada, the USA, Russia, France, Germany, and the UK in collaboration through key networks and outputs.

Project outputs

- An international conference which took place in October 2007, the Shivdasani Archaeology and Text conference;
- A conference-website disseminating visual and textual material from this gathering of senior scholars in the field to the wider academic community;
- An edited volume of related papers, forthcoming through the Routledge Hindu Studies book series in 2009.