

OXFORD CENTRE FOR HINDU STUDIES

Academic Strategy



A RECOGNISED INDEPENDENT CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies: the Next Five Years

The function of OCHS is the academic study of Hinduism, however complex that term is, to promote a critical inquiry into Hinduism and to allow for the articulation of an intellectual inquiry within Hindu traditions.

We have at OCHS a general vision of understanding and approaching Hinduism from a number of perspectives and disciplines; from Indology, the philological and critical study of texts, from Theology, the inquiry into what is regarded as revelation, from Anthropology, the study of particular communities, and from Religious Studies, the historical and descriptive account of what it is to be a Hindu.

To study Hinduism we need multiple tools and we need to draw on a number of academic disciplines in order to understand the many layers of the tradition. At OCHS we have a vision of the academic study of Hinduism that embraces both social science and humanities perspectives and that seeks understanding within a framework of critical, although sympathetic, inquiry. Indeed, we promote an ethos and atmosphere in which intellectual inquiry can be undertaken from within a Hindu tradition.

The academic values which OCHS adheres to, of open minded, critical inquiry, tolerance of diverse views, and friendship, are present in all our avenues of study. Indeed, this somewhat intangible spirit or ethos is central to the success of OCHS and has been remarked upon by students and visiting scholars alike. We believe that one of the functions of OCHS is to create the conditions for the critical inquiry into tradition from within tradition itself; in other words the development of Hindu theology both from within the horizon of the tradition and from perspectives outside of the tradition. This is not to say, of course, that OCHS promotes a particular view of Hinduism, it does not, or that it is confessional in its approach, it is not that either, but the centre does recognise the situated nature of inquiry and encourages reflexive awareness in the students and scholars who study here. Indeed, far from promoting a particular view of Hinduism we actively encourage our students to become exposed to as many intellectual influences as possible and to pursue rigour, particularly philological rigour, in their work. At OCHS we have been generally proud of the students who have passed through our doors and have gone on to hold academic positions at respectable universities.

Within this ethos of sympathetic yet critical inquiry, OCHS will develop in two broad directions in the coming five years. Firstly OCHS will develop Hindu theology and philosophy and secondly Hinduism in relation to social policy.

Philosophy and Theology

Philosophy and theology are central to the research concerns of staff at OCHS in relation to broader academic interest in the faculties of Theology and Oriental Studies. While Oriental Studies is mainly concerned with philological and historical inquiry, the only theological inquiry into Hindu traditions that can take place in the Theology Faculty in Oxford is through OCHS. We provide the resource and place where students can pursue theological and philosophical inquiry in a supportive environment that assumes Indology but wishes to develop other interests. Indeed, many of our visiting scholars have fallen within the general category of Theology and Philosophy.

One of the questions we intend to pursue is whether, in fact, the category 'Theology' is applicable to Hinduism given that its history is inextricably connected to Christianity and given that, for some Hindu traditions such as the Pratyabhijna or early Mimamsa, there is no 'theos' that is the focus of inquiry. By contrast, in some other traditions such as Sri Vaishnavism there clearly is a theos that is analogous to Christian theological inquiry.

At OCHS we intend to pursue these questions and to raise theological concerns within Hinduism that arise in relation to contemporary, Christian theological concerns. While modernity and postmodernity have had a massive impact on Christian Theology with the development of post-liberal approaches that emphasise the cultural and linguistic nature of religion (Lindbeck) or the return to tradition beyond modernity (Radical Orthodoxy) or a turn to the world as given (Theology in the World), there has been very little engagement in Hinduism with the kind of critical questions that have concerned western Theologians in recent decades.

OCHS is a western academic institution and we see that an important part of our remit is to offer a place where the kinds of critical questions that have engaged western Theologians, especially in the encounter of tradition with modernity, can be pursued within a Hindu context. There is no place for apologetics in OCHS but there is place for an intellectual rigour that offers corrective readings both of Hinduism from the perspective of late modernity and of late modernity from the perspective of Hinduism. The kind of debates that have been cultivated by the encounter of Islam with modernity have yet to happen in relation to Hinduism and we see OCHS as playing a leading role in developing such a discussion. Indeed, we would be very pleased if Hindu intellectuals were nurtured at OCHS.

Hinduism, Ethics and Social Policy

Part of the remit of OCHS is to address broader public and governmental concerns about Hindu communities, especially in the UK. While the primary focus of our activity is intellectual inquiry and academic study, there is a dimension of our work that offers information about Hinduism to both Hindu communities and to wider bodies, particularly the media, religious and government bodies but also private, social or legal practices.

The issue of the legitimacy of religion in the public sphere is of vital contemporary importance and is highly politically sensitive. There has been much discussion in recent years of the notion of citizenship and whether or how people can maintain cultural identities while at the same time as functioning as citizens in contemporary liberal democracies. There are practical issues at stake here, for example, the issue of the desirability of faith schools.

OCHS can provide information that contributes to this debate and can raise questions about the relation of religious law to secular law. What happens when they conflict (as in the case of open air cremations)? Contemporary Hindu politics, a kind of politics of revelation, in conflict with secular politics is one of the problems operating not only in India but in the UK too.

One of the issues at stake is the place of revelation in modernity. Hindus generally revere the Veda as revelation, however that is understood. Within the history or Indian traditions there has been both the philosophical critique of revelation (e.g. from within

Buddhism) and its defence (e.g. by Nyaya theologians such as Bhatta Narayana). This debate is clearly germane to the contemporary world where revelation is often seen to conflict with philosophy and where some have defended revelation against philosophy (Levinas) while others have defended philosophy against revelation (Leo Strauss). OCHS would like to see this debate developed in the context of Hinduism and modernity and to raise this issue that operates at fairly abstract levels but which has practical consequences in the realm of law and ethics.

Indeed, related to the question of revelation in modernity is the question of ethics and the conflict between moral criticism (of Hinduism by modernity and vice versa) and historicism. If liberal politics is suffused by historicism, how can moral criticism from within the boundary of a tradition, such as Hinduism, be effective? Conversely is it desirable for a particular kind of subjectivity (say a Hindu subjectivity) to critique the historicism of liberal politics which, in some ways, gives place for that subjectivity and ethnic identity? At OCHS we hope to pursue these kinds of questions and to offer informed opinion about them to public bodies that seek our advice.

A related part of the remit of OCHS is to provide a resource based on the academic study of Hinduism for a broad public. We intend to develop OCHS as a source of intelligent commentary focussed on the kinds of questions outlined above, within an ethos of critical, creative and engaged dialogue. OCHS can be a resource for scholars from Hindu communities to critically examine and engage with their own tradition. We will continue to encourage students to engage in dialogue outside of the centre and to engage in web-logs and media editorial. Central to this concern is law, governance, diaspora studies, and the environment. OCHS will provide resources for the study of these issues and a resource of information for public bodies.

Educational Programmes

While these general intellectual debates will inform the life of OCHS in the coming years, at a more practical level we also provide the teaching about Hinduism for undergraduate degrees in the Theology and Oriental Studies Faculties, in Oxford, and offer lecture and seminar series relevant to students of these and other Faculties. OCHS also provides supervision for postgraduate students (MSt, MPhil, DPhil). We intend to maintain this core activity and to develop closer collaboration with the faculties of Theology, Oriental Studies, History, and Anthropology in administration, research projects and teaching.

New Teaching Programmes

While the centre will continue to provide for these basic educational needs as part of its core academic activity, OCHS will also develop new teaching programmes. We intend to develop a robust programme within the Theology Faculty as a complement to its existing strengths. For example, in a parallel way to the teaching of New Testament Greek we will provide Sanskrit for Theologians in order that they can gain access to primary source material. We also hope to develop courses on Indian theology and to develop an Indian theology oriented track within the Theology undergraduate programme and to offer more courses on Indian theology and philosophy generally. As

part of this general trajectory we will be developing cross-textual readings of key texts (such as the Upanisads and Bhagavad Gita) in translation. Along with reading texts in translation we will offer short courses on texts in Sanskrit perhaps provided by visiting scholars.

We hope to develop a postgraduate degree in Hindu Studies ratified by the University of Oxford, namely a Diploma or MSt eventually developing into an MPhil degree. This would be within the Faculty of Theology and would complement other, parallel programmes such as the MSt in the Study of Religions.

Popular Culture

To complement these textual interests we intend to develop broader courses in Hindu popular culture, including film, material culture and the Indian visual arts. To this end we might attract Arts Council funding to have an Indian artist in residence for a term.

Web-Based Learning

Lastly over the coming five years we will develop a web-based learning facility and web-learning programmes. We already have an active web page which is accessed regularly by several thousand people. We intend to fully exploit and develop this resource.

Projects and Research

Apart from providing teaching, staff at OCHS pursue their own research sometimes in collaboration with others in Oxford or at different institutions. We are developing a number of theological and philosophical projects. We had a conference on archaeology and text in September 2007 and intend to hold a conference each year thereafter. Thus after the archaeology and text conference (2007) we are hoping to develop an interdisciplinary conference on the idea of a 'category' in Indian philosophy (2009), Shaktism (2010), and other conferences might be on Hindu theology, material culture, and ritual. We are also intending to develop small, high level, focussed colloquia on specific topics with a small number of dedicated participants such as religion as reading, language and ritual, and colloquia on specific texts such as the Bhagavata Purana, the Jayakhya Samhita, or the Tripurarahasya.

OCHS currently houses an archive on Hinduism in Britain and we intend to preserve and catalogue this archive in the coming years through, in due course, being able to employ an archivist.

Publishing

OCHS will continue to develop the Hindu Studies Series with Routledge. A number of books have been published, often in the area of Hindu philosophy and theology, and the series continues to grow. Over the next five years we hope that the series will become even more prestigious and attract submissions from highly renowned scholars.

The Journal of Hindu Studies will develop over the next five years under the general editorship of Dr Jessica Frazier. The journal will sometimes be themed (e.g. philosophy,

text, ritual) and function through guest editors, although some years there will be no specific theme.

The next five years will also see the development of an OCHS monograph series which will publish shorter, focussed studies, and a text in translation project. It is hoped that texts published in such a series will be bi-lingual editions, based on the model of the Clay Sanskrit library. The project would not rival that in so far as we would focus on religious texts.

Staff and Facilities

While OCHS currently has a low staff base (currently the academic director, the academic administrator, the executive director, and the librarian), we hope to increase this in the future. We hope to develop two lectureships in Hindu Studies in the coming years. These lectureships will reflect the trajectories of the centre. Thus the first, within five years, we hope will be in the area of theology/philosophy while the second will be in social science and/or history by ten years time. We also hope to develop two three year stipendiary research fellowships and further scholarships to complement the already existing scholarships. There is also need to secure funding for a librarian and funding to develop a stronger library resource.

The library will continue to grow through donations and once funding is secured within five years, we will develop specialisations such as Bengali texts or Vaisnava texts. OCHS is very aware of the burgeoning interest in web-based learning and over the coming years will develop this. Thus we hope to develop the OCHS website, to provide more MP3 downloads, and to be sensitive to student needs (e.g. by providing a toolkit with downloadable lectures, texts and articles within copyright law).

Summary

The core activity of OCHS is the academic study of Hinduism which means the intellectual development of thinking about Hinduism in relation to philosophy, theology and modernity and the provision of teaching for the University of Oxford. This means providing lectures and seminars both for formal programmes within the Theology and Oriental Studies Faculties, providing teaching for postgraduate and undergraduates, providing lectures and seminars of a more general nature (such as the continuing education programmes), publishing, public broadcasting, and providing reliable information for public bodies such as the BBC and government agencies.

Over the next five years OCHS intends to see that this core activity continues and that we also develop in new directions. Such directions will include the development of a first class webpage to which the public has access and to provide informative lectures available on line, to develop the library through donations of books and funds, to make OCHS a generally busy and vibrant centre where scholars can interact, which provides academic programmes of local, national and international importance, provides general information on Hinduism to public bodies, and provides a focus for contemporary Hindu cultural events. Over the next five years we need to develop a strong personnel base of both academic and administrative staff in order to become the foremost centre for the study of Hinduism setting a trend for the rest of the world.