Introduction: Innovation in Hindu Traditions

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This themed issue of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies* is about the historical, philosophical, and theological factors involved in speaking about change, innovation, and newness in Hindu traditions, especially Mādhva Vaiṣṇava, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, contemporary Advaita, and popular forms of contemporary Hinduism. The underlying question addressed in this issue is: In what manner did Hindu thinkers and Hindu leaders create newness and intellectual innovation? This question has lately received attention from scholars, and it is to this body of scholarship that this issue hopes to contribute.

Hindu *śāstras* frequently say their views are timeless, immortal, or entirely lacking newness, and likewise Hindu theologians and philosophers frequently frame their own teachings as nothing but a restatement of an ancient root text's original intent and meaning or as clarifying its meaning without any substantive change to the philosophies and theologies of their own previous teachers. As demonstrated in the papers in this issue of the IJHS, from an Indological and historical perspective, these claims simply cannot be true. The acceptance of such theses would also, I believe, undermine the brilliance and fecundity of Indian intellectuals, reducing them to mere parrots rather than independently thoughtful, creative, and constructive authors. There is a real sense in which the Hindu thinkers represented here are in fact creative and constructive thinkers, even when their new philosophies and theologies are justified through exegesis of root texts, through exegesis of authoritative teachers in their tradition, or as reconstructions of a premodern or forgotten time.

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This is the first issue of the IJHS to be fully dedicated to Hindu theology, and I wish to say a bit about what the term “Hindu theology” might mean in the context of an academic journal devoted to the study of Hinduism. I will discuss how and why the theme of “innovation” is so vital to any constructive discussion of Hinduism in a contemporary intellectual context. Theology, broadly speaking, is a logical and rational investigation into the nature of God (for example, *brahman*, *bhagavat*, *īśvara*, and so on), things related to religious practice (*dharma*, *yajña*, *yoga*, and so on), or the nature of the divine’s relationship with the world and the self (*ātman*, *jīva*, *puruṣa*, and so on). In the course of investigating such issues, other topics must arise such as epistemology, philosophy of language, the nature of the mind, world, and body, and so forth. Often these other topics are in the service of underpinning or clarifying the sorts of larger religious issues mentioned above. Theology is also a discipline that, like others, takes “tradition” seriously in its reflection, and in a Hindu context that would mean a critical and exegetical reflection on specific *śāstras* and their learned commentators. As noted in this issue, while many Hindu thinkers depict themselves as providing exegesis, they are often of independent minds in doing so and use the exegetical process as a way of articulating their own views. Theologians often see themselves as speaking to or informing the religious communities in which they participate, and in Hindu contexts the *ācāryas*, learned *gurus*, respected commentators, and so on, often do inform, guide, and shape the *saṃpradāyas* in which they participate. Contemporary Mādhva, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, and Advaita religious communities continue to read and quote their learned teachers of the past as authorities for the present.

If we take Hindu theology as a genitive *tat-puruṣa*, it means a rational investigation of God *dharma*, and so on, by people who identify with or are identified as members of and speakers for particular Hindu communities. The term “Hindu” does not implicate one in thinking of Hinduism is a monolithic category any more than the terms “Christian theology” or “Western philosophy” entail a singular Christian or Western view. As will be demonstrated in this issue, the sorts of problems and their manners of solution are varied among Mādhva, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, Advaita, and contemporary Hindu approaches.

The ability of a religious tradition to respond to the present, yet another feature of a theologian, requires an understanding of how thinkers in the

past responded to the present that was their own. We have, therefore, framed the papers around the issue of “innovation” in a historical mode. The assumption of each paper is that a clear and objective understanding of history—and for our purposes, the historical interpretation of scriptural texts by the theologians of the tradition—is necessary for an informed discussion about how Hindu traditions can respond critically and constructively to contemporary theological, philosophical, political issues.

We have arranged the papers according to the historical periods they address, with the oldest first, something that will allow us to see the manner in which innovation itself is addressed differently over time given the new social, political, and intellectual situations Hindus encountered.

We start with **Michael Williams’** paper, which provides us with an indepth examination of a critical period in the history of Mādhva Vedānta, when Vyāsātīrtha (1460–1539) not only encountered, but sought to assimilate aspects of Navya-Nyāya. Williams notes that Vyāsātīrtha acknowledges that his *Nyāyāmṛta* says things that had “not been said” (*anukta*) in the works of his predecessors Madhva (1238–1317) and Jayatīrtha (fourteenth century). Vyāsātīrtha’s disciple and first commentator, Vijayīndratīrtha, is unalarmed by this statement, saying that his *guru* only meant that he taught things that the previous *ācāryas* had known, but for one reason or another had chosen not to say. The novel contributions of Vyāsātīrtha are unproblematic, it appeared to Vijayīndratīrtha, because Vyāsātīrtha was only saying what the previous *ācāryas* thought but did not say. Approximately one century later Ānandabhaṭṭāraka (flourished early seventeenth century) was concerned with Vyāsātīrtha’s statement, and in seeking to make sense of it, he articulated an attitude toward his predecessors that is perhaps more familiar to the student of Indian thought, one that shows the anxiety about innovation. Wouldn’t saying something that was “unsaid” by the previous *ācāryas* imply that they left something out? Wouldn’t they then be lazy, lacking in deliberation, or deficient? Positing innovation implies that one’s teachers were incompetent or in need of correction. That sort of thinking about the previous *ācāryas* was unacceptable, so Ānandabhaṭṭāraka takes it upon himself to interpret Vyāsātīrtha as merely saying his *Nyāyāmṛta* discusses what is “apprehended (*pratīyamānatvam*) as though it were unsaid.” Ānandabhaṭṭāraka seems to imply that Vyāsātīrtha only wants to illuminate what we, the reader, might fail to notice in the otherwise flawless works of the previous

Mādhva teachers. Williams argues, however, that Vyāsatīrtha sought to establish himself “as a thinker working with a definite independence of thought, albeit within a preexisting framework,” and we are given specific instances of Vyāsatīrtha’s assimilation of Navya-Nyāya logic, not just as fancy new ways of saying the same thing, but as substantively new Mādhva theology and philosophy.

Our second paper is from **Kiyokazu Okita**, who offers a detailed examination of the concept of *adhikāra* (“qualification” or “eligibility”) in the work of an early and founding member of the Gauḍīya or Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, Rūpa Gosvāmī (sixteenth century), as it applies to the sorts of prerequisites needed to study the esoteric and religiously erotic texts of the tradition, especially the *Vidagdhamādhava* and the *Ujjvala-nīlamanī*. As demonstrated by Okita, the later tradition had sought to close these texts off from those who were considered nonadepts, saying that prior to their study one needed to be qualified for certain religious practices (*sādhana*) meant only for the well-seasoned and expert devotees and one needed a deep learning of the corpus of introductory and middle-level texts of the tradition. On a personal level, Okita notes how he, being perceived as unqualified, has been discouraged from studying the texts by contemporary Gauḍīya scholars. Rūpa Gosvāmī’s articulations of *adhikāra* are thus still used today to guide the tradition. Undoubtedly other students of Indian religion have experienced much the same in other religious contexts. Okita problematizes the very notion of *adhikāra* as defined by Rūpa Gosvāmī and his commentators by engaging the pre-suppositions of the tradition itself, not by disregarding it as meaningless or antiquated, but by attempting to make sense of it in a new context. In doing so he seeks to develop a conception of Hindu theology that opens the study of esoteric texts to those who might otherwise lack the rather demanding moral and practical attributes of an adept, yet one that “remains respectful and sensitive to the insider perspective.” This, he argues, is going to require a “phenomenological perspective,” one that is aware of the philological, ontological, narrative, and commentarial aspects of the tradition one studies. This presents us with a constructive theory on the theological method. Okita’s paper thus contributes to the growing discussion on Hindu theology, suggesting that there are ways to change existing norms in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *saṃpradāya* that are in fact new and different but are nevertheless not inconsistent with its history and tradition.

Moving ahead in time to the early part of the last century, **Timothy S. Dobe** enunciates a rich theoretical architecture through which we can understand Rāma Tīrtha (1873–1906), a Punjabi “Neo-Vedāntin” shaped by Advaita, *bhakti*, and Šūfī lines of thought. With Rāma Tīrtha we are in a period of time when Hindu literature is for the most part composed and read in vernacular languages, as it is today, and a time when new genres of Hindu literature are emerging due to more intimate contact with Western culture and due to the Indian appropriation of printing press technology. In the case of Rāma Tīrtha’s writing there is the unification of the reporting of subjectively experienced “mystical” states, autobiography, hagiography, and religious instruction. Yet this “self-writing,” as Dobe calls it, is constructed and idealized, something Dobe refers to as “autohagiographical.” Nevertheless in ways that were not possible before this period we get a chance to see something of the life and times “from the inside” of a renouncer making his way around India, albeit the inside as Rāma Tīrtha wants us, his reader, to see it. Dobe notes that while some would dismiss this sort of writing as a mere product of Western influence since it does not conform to the previous tradition of Brāhmaṇical discourse, we might in fact see such innovative writing as affirming a fundamental Vedāntic concept, the self-revelation of “the One” in the written word.

Bringing us into the world of contemporary Hinduism, **Amanda Lucia** discusses the diverse range of recent Hindu *gurus*, particularly those who are popular and with mass appeal, and who, she argues, are some of “the most vibrant innovators in the field of Hindu religiosity.” As a global phenomenon, the rate of change, of adaptation, and of reconfiguration in this popular Hindu context is perhaps unprecedented, and Lucia explores some of the common themes, techniques, and methods (“*upāya*”) used by Hindu *gurus* to create and sustain a discipleship and ministry, focusing on those *gurus* that have “garnered worldwide attention” but not the existing local lineages that thrive in India and elsewhere. While the *gurus* reviewed here might not be considered theologians in the sense of giving a reasoned, systematic, and scholastic interpretation of the learned texts and previous teachers in their religious tradition in the way that Vyāsatīrtha, Rūpa Gosvāmī, and Rāma Tīrtha attempted, this contributes to our understanding of the larger social context in which any contemporary Hindu theology would need to speak. Lucia insightfully notes that while the larger Hindu

tradition is engaged by Hindu *gurus* (to the extent it is known and understood by the *gurus*), and while they are and they must be innovative to generate popularity in new contexts that are often radically different than the original contexts, there is a danger that Hinduism will lose a recognizable contact with the past or that the *gurus* will present mere “nostalgia-based” interpretations of the past in an effort to respond to the perceived problems of the modern world. Knowing how and in what manner contemporary *gurus* innovate requires two knowledge bases: a detailed knowledge of the historical traditions out of which they emerge and which they claim to represent, and a detailed knowledge of the content of their teaching. Lucia contributes to our understanding of both in this issue of the *IJHS*.

Lucia has thus taken us in a full circle, from the learned logical and epistemological innovations of a Mādhva scholar that address the needs and interests of similarly learned scholars who were grappling with the new philosophical movements of their day, to the refashioning of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava conception of the eligibility or the entitlement to study the tradition’s most esoteric religious erotica to meet the aspirations of the contemporary Indologist while not ignoring the concerns and needs of practitioners who have lovingly preserved these texts for hundreds of years, to a new genre of mystical self-writing for *bhakti* infused and Ṣūfī inspired forms of Advaita Vedānta that served the needs of an emerging literate Hindu middle class. We see here a rich set of patterns and techniques through which one of the world’s oldest religious traditions has evolved and remade itself over time in the hands of its caretakers, those who have made the decisions as to what should be preserved and how the preserved should be spoken about, augmented, or reinterpreted.

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