

DANAM CONFERENCE 2004

SESSION 2:

*Theme: **New Approaches to Methodological Concerns in Hindu Studies***
Rita DasGupta Sherma, Binghamton University & Berghoffer Institute, Presiding

SUMMARY AND ABSTRACTS

Summary of Session 2:

This session is in response to the continuing tensions in Hindu Studies. As members of the academy studying the field, or as practitioners of the traditions being studied, it is incumbent upon us to seek strategies to progressively attend to this situation in ways that can help open a new path for dialectical engagement where the passive tension that now permeates the field can be transformed into a creative tension that engenders solutions.

This panel addresses both concerns about, and constructive approaches to, the methodologies of Religious Studies in light of the current controversies afflicting Studies in the Hindu traditions. The topics that will be central to the panel are: pedagogical issues including strategies for appropriate teaching methods and learning styles that pertain to different student groups; challenges to conventional heuristics in Religious Studies that may discourage dialogue in our pluralistic society; examination of the validity of criticisms of academic methods and traditional stances; and new hermeneutical approaches to both textual *and* contextual analysis that can be elicited from the internal categories of the Hindu traditions, particularly the tantric ethos.

Abstracts of Session 2:

Andrew O. Fort, Ph.D., Texas Christian University
Teaching Texas Christians About Hinduism Today

While the number of students of South Asian heritage has increased enormously at some universities over recent decades, it has hardly changed at others, including mine. Below, I want to describe how I present Hindu religious traditions to a largely Christian and Euro-American audience, and then offer some more general reflections on the teaching of Hinduism in the U. S. today. I discuss teaching in the liberal arts university setting, and managing the inevitable and ongoing tension between the scholarly duties to represent a tradition accurately and to offer possibly controversial analyses of a tradition. I then describe some of the particular conceptual and contextual issues (differing authorities and interests, and political and cultural imperialism). Finally, I argue that the turmoil in Hindu Studies today reproduces misunderstandings and bad feelings that have occurred between scholars and believers in other religious traditions as well, and ask how to best open more space for constructive and productive conversation. The latter feel their deepest convictions misperceived, disrespected, or even blasphemed, and scholars feel assailed, misunderstood, and even silenced. How do we manage the inevitable and ongoing tension between the scholarly duties to represent a tradition accurately and to offer possibly controversial analyses of a tradition? How do we best open more space for constructive and productive conversation?

Rajiv Malhotra, Infinity Foundation
Geopolitics and Hinduism Studies

While postcolonial scholars have harshly critiqued the dead British Empire's study and construction of Hinduism, they have not conducted similar studies about the relationship between the American Empire, its academic models, and Hinduism Studies. The paper proposes the importance of critiques of various factors, such as: the use of Judeo-Christian lenses for viewing Indian culture; the geopolitical role of American Christian proselytizing; and embedded Indian intellectuals serving USA's South Asian Studies. It spotlights the contradiction that while "whitened" Hindu ideas and practices are being U-Turned into the liberal version of the American Grand Narrative, simultaneously, anthropology and psychoanalysis of "non-whitened" Hinduism are the foundation for the discourse on India's human rights problems. The role of market-driven Hindu gurus in promoting "whitening" through hybridity/mimicry is also examined.

Cynthia Ann Humes, Claremont McKenna College
"Fair and Balanced": An Inquiry into New Directions Emerging in the Study of Geopolitics and Hinduism

Recently, American Rajiv Malhotra, frequently referred to as a "technology entrepreneur" who espouses loyalty to India, has used his wealth in his retirement to set forth on a mission to "brand" India according to a new, improved "Indian Grand Narrative." Primary in his toolkit are the use of internet and computer technologies to reach a new audience and to investigate his subjects. My paper will examine this phenomena, as well as Indian and Hindu attempts to interject what Malhotra has called "balance and objectivity into India Studies." I will also consider responses by various academics to these efforts. Throughout, I discuss issues of cultural negotiations via the internet, academic freedom, and self-determination. In particular, I will examine strategic commonalities of both sides to larger trends, reflecting on the warrants and methods implicit and explicit in how various individuals and/or groups attempt to establish authority, frame discourses, curtail unwanted inquiry or methodologies, and contest and/or defend the "Indian" view and/or "Western" academy. In my conclusion, I will discuss how my own personal, intellectual, geopolitical, religious, and spiritual frames have contributed to my analysis of the subject.

Sthaneswar Timalsina, Ph.D. and **Jeffrey Lidke, Ph.D.**, Berry College
The Identification and Application of an Abhinavaguptian Hermeneutics: Towards Methodology in the Study of Tantra

Abstract: Contemporary understanding and interpretation of world cultures, literature, and religious phenomena has been profoundly influenced by western thought. However, the potential for a universal hermeneutics grounded in indigenous cultures is yet to receive full and serious consideration. In our two part paper, we argue that one of the most effective means to critically interpret Indic culture, literature, and society is to apply the hermeneutical insights of one of Tantra's most gifted theoreticians: the 11th century theoretician and yogic master, Abhinavagupta.

In **Part One** of this paper, **Dr. Timalsina** analyzes several of Abhinavagupta's core writings—*Isvrapratyabhijna-Karika-Vimarsini*, and *Tantrasara*, among others—in order to outline seven principles that comprise a foundational 'Abhinavaguptian hermeneutics':

- 1) The establishment of difference-within-identity as the ultimate reality.

- 2) The acceptance of the truth value of a multiplicity of ritual activities, and the claim that the distinction between such dualistic notions as 'internal' and 'external' falls away with the rise of self-awareness.
- 3) The inclusion of a multiplicity of spiritual paths (*upaayaas*).
- 4) The ability to interpret a single text on multiple levels.
- 5) The ability to link scriptural truths to contemporary issues, thereby localizing and trans-historicizing their claims.
- 6) The belief that beauty underlies 'truth', that the real, in other words, has aesthetic value.
- 7) The belief that any mode of awareness and worldly activity can be an instrument for recognizing one's divine nature.

In **Part Two** of this paper **Dr. Lidke** demonstrates the application of an 'Abhinavaguptian hermeneutics' to the study of Indic cultures in Nepal and Bali. In conclusion, both Lidke and Timalina argue that this application of indigenous categories in the study of Tantra provides a hermeneutical template that ought to be replicated in other studies of indigenous traditions. Moreover, they argue that an 'Abhinavaguptian hemeneute' is no less entitled and capable of studying western culture than a western hermeneute is in studying Indic cultures. If the writings of Hegel, Weber, Turner, and Foucault can be utilized to produce meaning of things Oriental, then the writings of Abhinavagupta (and other Indic minds) can be yoked to illuminate that which arises in the Occident.