

Editorial

Introduction to “Religious Experience in the Hindu Tradition”

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Abstract: This special issue of *Religions* brings together a talented group of international scholars who have studied and written on the Hindu tradition. The topic of religious experience is much debated in the field of Religious Studies, and here we present studies of Hindu religious experience explored from a variety of regions and perspectives. They are intended to show that religious experience has long been an important part of Hinduism, and we consider them to be important and relevant. As a body of scholarship, these articles refine our understanding of the range and variety of religious experience in Hinduism. In addition to their substantive contributions, the authors also show important new directions in the study of the third-largest religion in the world, with over one billion followers. This introduction will discuss some relevant issues in the field of Indology, some problems of language, and the difficulties faced in the study of religious experience. It will also give a brief sketch of the religious experiences described by our authors in some major types of Hinduism.

Keywords: India; Hinduism; yoga; tantra; devotion; meditation; prayer; saints; brahman; bhāva; mahābhāva; bhakti; trance; samādhi; mokṣa; darśan; bhakti

Religious experience in Hinduism is a challenging topic—all three terms are contested ones. ‘Hinduism’ is not an indigenous word, it is an umbrella term used first by outsiders, intended to cover a wide variety of systems of belief and practice in India. The term ‘religion’ has a wide variety of definitions, ranging from individual to social to universal. Additionally, the concept of ‘experience’ has come under scrutiny over the past century, with philosophical emphases on materialism, empirical proofs, and the limits of human knowledge. The opposition to the area of religious and mystical experience as a legitimate area of study has been written about many times in recent years; a good overview of the literature can be found in Leigh Eric Schmidt’s article “The Making of Modern Mysticism.”¹

While Hindu philosophy also has materialist schools, there are many branches that allow for a greater range of human awareness and understanding than we see in Western philosophies. The self is structured in a more complex way than is currently acceptable in Western psychology, with forms of perception that bring different interpretations of the world (and worlds) in which we live. While these abilities may be strengthened and clarified by specific beliefs and practices, they are not understood to be created by them. For many of the meditative traditions, they might be comparable to muscles, which are present naturally but can be made stronger and more visible through exercise.

A single journal issue cannot be comprehensive on such a broad subject. This Issue is intended to show some of the range of religious experiences in Hinduism, and some academic approaches to understanding it. It includes articles on men and women, householders and renunciants, yogis and devotees, artists and musicians, and philosophers. Some forms of religious experience are blissful and

¹ (Schmidt 2003).

positive, others are more dangerous. Some papers focus on empathy and are ‘experience-near,’ while others are more skeptical and ‘experience-distant’. For the practitioners described here by our authors, religious experience is a way to understand life as meaningful and worthwhile, lived in relation to a greater whole.

Each of the papers here has its own approach to the topic. Religious experience can include such ideal religious states as *mokṣa*, *samādhi*, *śānti*, *darśan*, *bhakti*, *brahmajñāna*, *śaktipat*, and *rasa*. However, it can also include darker states, such as the presence of disease deities, as well as ways of blessing everyday life. There is no single correct religious experience in the great array of beliefs and practices included under the Hindu umbrella, though different traditions emphasize their own as preferable.

Every approach has its own concepts and terminology. However, one important general concept in this area is the term *bhāva*. It has both the breadth and ambiguity that we see in the English word ‘experience.’ It can refer to existence, state, condition, mental state, mood, emotion, inner significance, imagination, and ecstasy.² The Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary has four columns of definitions for the term *bhāva*, and the *Bangalar Bhasar Abhidhan* has two columns, which include such meanings as heart, imagination, divinity, yogic powers, passion, trance, and rapture.³ When used simply as ‘*bhāva*’, it often means a mood or state of mind (which can be secular), but when it is phrased as *mahābhāva* or great *bhāva*, the term refers specifically to a religious state. We sometimes see it used as *anubhāva* or direct inner experience (a legitimate source of knowledge in Indian philosophy), and *bhāvaveśa* or ‘the state of possession trance’, referring to a person being overwhelmed by a deity, an ancestor, or a passion. All of these papers examine different *bhāvas*, as states of being or religious experiences.

Our first article, by Jeffery Long, describes the historical origins of Hindu universalism. Rather than being a product of modern colonialism or the ‘neo-Hinduism’ of Vivekananda and others, Dr. Long shows that the ideas of universalism are much older and more traditional, a part of the philosophy of the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Brahma Sūtras, and Bhagavad Gītā. As expressed by the nineteenth century Bengali saint and *siddhā* Ramakrishna Paramahansa, direct experience of ultimate reality by different paths is a valuable part of life, like different musical instruments playing together to create a symphony, or pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that work together to show us a whole. Direct experience, as shown in terms like *anubhāva* and *pratyakṣa*, is a part of Hindu philosophy and considered a legitimate source of knowledge. Dr. Long compares several Eastern and Western philosophers on the logical connections between universalism and direct religious experience. He also notes the value of such an approach for daily life, bringing tolerance and compassion to people of different religions.

Our next article by Frederick Smith compares religious experience in Sāṃkhya, yoga, and possession trance. He argues that an inner organ (*antahkarana*) is activated when the person experiences *samyama*, the fusion of the three highest yogic states according to Patanjali. This occurs after the state of *samādhi*. It is the awakening of this internal organ that impels or generates the experiences described in texts and ethnographies. He discusses Sāṃkhya and Yoga texts, and research on the state of possession. He finds that the moment of transition from ordinary body awareness to experiencing possession trance and final emergence of the deity is comparable to the yogin entering into the states of concentration, meditation, and *samādhi*, which eventually achieve a critical mass. It is at that point that he or she enters a state in which higher powers can be realized.

The article by Chris Chapple discusses the role of yoga as bringing three qualities emphasized by the philosopher William James: light, knowledge, and morality. Basing his discussion on Patanjali’s Yoga Sūtra and the Bhagavad Gītā, he shows how yogic light brings both enlightenment and being ‘lightened’ from past karma, with inner light that purifies the mind and body. Yoga brings knowledge through the quality of *jñāna*, physical and metaphysical knowledge expressed through Vedānta and Sāṃkhya philosophical teachings. The practitioner can move from ignorance to reason, and also

² These definitions come from the *Samsad Bengali-English Dictionary*, and the breadth of the meaning of the word is discussed in (McDaniel 1989, pp. 21–25).

³ Ibid, p. 21.

develop moral virtues, such as non-violence and compassion. Dr. Chapple also suggests some practices that he has personally found to encourage these states.

Veena Howard's article on the Sant Mat tradition describes a spiritual path of sound and light, involving yogic meditative practices, mantra, and visualization. Its goal of spiritual peace or *śānti* is reached with the help of a teacher, a congregation, a moral system, and set of meditative techniques. Her focus here is the Bihari school of Santmat, led by Maharishi Mehi, whose books and discourses she has been translating. It combines Hindu teachings, especially from the Upanishads, with other religious traditions. There are both monastic and lay followers, and the meditative practices are linked to social reform in rural and tribal areas.

Alfred Collins' article explores the psychological impact of *darśan*, the encounter with ultimacy through vision, in the Hindu perspectives of Sāṃkhya and Yoga. He examines the challenges to exploration of the individual self in philosophy, as due to critiques of essentialism, supposed limits of the capitalist mind, and the 'death of God' in the modern West. Religious experience, according to the Hindu schools he examines, does not glorify the individual self but rather has that self dissolve into its realization of pure spirit (*puruṣa*). It exists through its perception of the universal; the self sees through being seen, uniting the opposites of life. Dr. Collins describes different constructions of the self in Eastern and Western psychology, focusing on the dualistic Samkhya school. As in modern 'self-psychology' where the child's psyche is developed through the mother's gaze, in Sāṃkhya we have the individual self which becomes realized through the gaze of the universal spirit.

Antoinette DeNapoli's article discusses the experience of *nirguṇa bhakti*, devotion to a formless god, among the North Indian *sādhus* with whom she has worked. The goal for these Rajasthani renunciants is peace and stillness, in the presence of an impersonal god beyond the physical senses. *Sādhus* describe this state as melting into the ocean of god consciousness, a process of surrendering individual will and ego. She shows extraordinary empathy for her informants, describing their emotions and the goals of their lives. Singing *bhajans* or hymns is a practice that encourages this state of *bhakti*, thus "keeping the diamond safe"; it is the best form of loving devotion to the god.

Jack Llewellyn's article on *bhakti* has a more experience-distant approach, and it asks the question, "How much can we know about a devotee's religious experiences?" He examines seventeenth century hagiographies of the saint Tukaram, of the Varkari Vaiṣṇava tradition of Maharashtra. His article asks whether saint biographies are simply fictions, whitewashing life events and idealizing their subjects, or do they show what believers think is true, or what is actually true? Is the scholar able to appreciate a 'sense of presence' from historical narratives? Can modern people understand the experiences of people who might have a different sense of self and world? Dr. Llewellyn holds to the skeptical approach—that our knowledge is necessarily limited.

Guy Beck's article on religious experience evoked by music gives a fine history of sacred sound and Hindu spirituality. From Vedic chant to the Upaniṣads, from Yoga philosophy to Tantric rituals, from theistic worship in the Bhakti movements to classical Rāgas, we can see that religious states can be evoked by aesthetics as well as text and narrative. The goal of hymns and mantras was classically *śabda brahman* (realization of god as sound), and later the experience of aesthetic *rasa*, religious emotion experienced through drama and through ritual worship and *kirtan* singing. Musical religious experience can include both *nirguṇa* and *sagūṇa* understandings of deity, and sacred sound is a way of linking together the various sectarian schools of Hinduism.

Mani Rao's description of Srividya religious experience at Devipuram involves tantric imagery, and discusses the uses of mantra and the ways that visionary experience is evoked. The disciples of Amritanandanatha Saraswati focus on a particular type of symbol, the Sriyantra, whose triangles represent the union of Shiva and Shakti. This yantra acts as a meditative tool, as a map of spiritual space, and as a place of embodiment; it is both a description and a location. The person's body becomes identified with the yantra as he or she enters into it. Dr. Rao describes the visionary experiences of many disciples, as well as the founding vision of the guru, and the central role of both mantra and vision in meditation.

Jeffrey Ruff's article focuses on a particular type of religious experience, the unity of art and *sādhanā* or spiritual practice. In Shākta tantra, the awakening of kundalini energy or *śaktipāt* can occur during initiation and meditation but it can also occur through appreciation of beauty. The goddess' grace shows itself in a variety of ways, with a blurring of boundaries between the religious and the aesthetic. Artists, teachers, and writers can inspire bliss in others, and modern tantric practitioners have described unconventional forms of religious experience, ranging from traumatic to ecstatic. The power of the goddess may be found in wealth and good luck, knowledge, and awareness; in artistic and scientific creativity; and in traditional tantric meditative practices.

However, what if god is an affliction, who gives you diseases and fevers? The article by Perundevi Srinivasan has a very different approach to religious experience, where the South Indian goddess Mariyamman shows her presence by illness. Like the Biblical Job with his boils, the devotee has been faithful, yet the gift of the god's presence through illness is also a curse. While the question in Job is theodicy, the origin and reason for such disasters, Dr Srinivasan explores the question of complexity through the metaphorical understandings of divine presence through disease in this article. Illness can be the 'play' of the goddess; it can act as protection from astrological dangers, and it can be understood as divine grace, as possession, and as fertility.

Our last article brings religious experience down to earth, as blowing the conch in the evening brings household happiness that is linked with life, death, and rebirth. Sukanya Sarbadhikary's article discusses Bengali domestic worship of the goddesses Lakshmi and Manasa, in a home which is understood to be the embodiment of cosmic space and time. The AUM sound of the conch evokes Lakshmi and auspiciousness, as well as Manasa, who both bring danger and rescue people from it. Daily life is immersed in sacred time, including both fertility and renunciation. The complex symbolism of the conch unites these ideas, with a home altar that brings opposites together in the religious experience of the everyday world. Rather than transcendent experiences of divinity, here we have the immanent blessing of the physical world and the family in it.

There are thus many perspectives in this Issue on religious experience in Hinduism. While some modern writers in Religious Studies argue that interest in Eastern religious experience is post-colonial and a Western imposition,⁴ we can look back to arguments over its role in Hindu writings from many centuries ago.

One interesting discussion on this topic allows us to end on a lighter note, to see an early use of satire in the area of religious experience. This style can be seen in the tradition of tantra in India, which developed gradually but is usually dated from sixth to seventh century onwards.⁵ While today its popular association is rebellion and sexuality, its earlier uses include military, political, and medical applications. Tantric religious experience was also associated with ecstasy, but also with health and longevity.

One famous tantric text is the *Kulārnavā Tantra*, frequently cited by Bengali practitioners as the most important tantra for Shākta tantrikas.⁶ It is a medieval text usually dated to the thirteenth century

⁴ For example, Robert Sharf writes in his article on "Experience" in Mark Taylor's *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, ideas of religious experience in Asia are "a relatively late and distinctively Western invention." This is discussed in (McDaniel 2018, pp. 235–36).

⁵ The dating of the tantric tradition has been widely debated. Here I follow the dating of Geoffrey Samuel (who cites the research of Alexis Sanderson and David Gordon White). See (Samuel and Johnston 2013, p. 35).

⁶ The *Kulārnavā Tantra* is a major text for Shākta tantric practitioners in West Bengal. Shāktism or goddess worship is a type of sectarian Hinduism that emphasizes the role of the goddess as both creatress and savior, and the tantras that follow this tradition discuss goddess worship in detail. Shākta tantrikas interviewed during two years of fieldwork in West Bengal told me that the *Kulārnavā Tantra* was the most important Shākta tantric text written, and it was used in daily ritual. Here I use the Bengali translation of the *Kulārnavā Tantra* published by Nababharat Publishers, which was the version used by most informants. The most famous translation, by Sir John Woodroffe/Arthur Avalon, leaves out large chunks of the text and does not translate the writing line by line. Instead, it gives Woodroffe's opinions on what tantra should be. It also slants many translations towards Vedānta and away from Shāktism, portraying tantra as philosophical and rational. Thus, I will not use this translation here, and go directly to the Sanskrit/Bengali text.

CE, though Goudriaan and Gupta give a wider range, from the tenth to the fifteenth century CE.⁷ While some later commentators tend to emphasize the intellectual goal of tantric study and practice, and use such words for tantra's goal as *vidyā* (learning or scholarship), *tattvā* (essential nature, truth, philosophical knowledge), and *jnana* (wisdom, understanding), we see this text itself using terms like *pratyakṣa* (immediate experience), *bhāva* (mood, feeling, emotion), *upalabdhi* (realization), and *ullāsa* (blissful joy). Here, the text satirizes brahmin intellectuals and philosophers, who value theory over experience:

- 87. O Beloved! Many ignorant people fall into the deep well of the six philosophies; they are controlled by their instincts and cannot attain the highest knowledge;
- 88. They are drowning in the dreadful ocean of the Vedas and shastras, and they are driven in one direction and then another, by philosophical discussions and debates, which are like terrible waves and crocodiles;
- 89. [There are] people who have read the Vedas, Agamas, and Puranas but who do not know the highest truth. All their knowledge is like the cawing of crows, and nothing more;
- 90. O Goddess, they turn their backs on truth and read books day and night, always worrying about what they should be learning, saying this is knowledge or that is knowledge;
- 91. They know literary style, syntax, and poetry, and ways to make writing attractive, but they are fools, and they are confused and worried;
- 92. What they understand is not the ultimate truth (*paramāttvā*), and what they interpret is not the real meaning of the sacred books;
- 93. They speak of ecstatic consciousness (*unmanī-bhāva*) but they do not experience it. [This is because] some are vain and some have never been taught by a guru;
- 94. They chant the Vedas and fight among themselves, but they do not know the highest truth, as a cooking ladle does not know the taste of the food in it.⁸

Studying the Vedas and Shāstras gives knowledge of the tradition, but it does not give the seeker what is most needed, which is direct insight and ecstatic consciousness. The *Kulārṇava Tantra* condemns shallow pandits and philosophers:

- 97. Discussion of ideas cannot destroy the illusions of the world, as talk of a lamp will not get rid of the darkness;
- 98. A person who studies but does not know ultimate reality is like a blind man looking at his face in a mirror.⁹

As we can see, the topic of religious experience is not a new one in Hinduism, brought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by colonialists, Orientalists, and Western scholars. As the articles in this issue show, it has been present and important for thousands of years. It has not only been emphasized in many Hindu religious traditions, but its lack has been both noticed and critiqued.

As we examine the role of religious experience in Hinduism, let us turn to our first article.

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⁷ (Goudriaan and Gupta 1981, p. 93).

⁸ Upendrakumar Das, ed. 1363 B.S./1976. *Kulārṇava Tantram: Mūla, Tikā O Banganubadasaha*, Calcutta: Nababharata Pablisars. This is a Sanskrit text, with a Bengali translation and commentary. It will be abbreviated here as KT. The English translations are my own. KT I. 87–94.

⁹ Ibid, KT I. 97–98.

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