

Dharma and the Academy: A Hindu Academic's View

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Abstract

The field of Hindu studies has been in turmoil for over more than a decade now, ever since the Hindu community started taking strong objection to some of the ways in which Hinduism is depicted in the Western media and academia. This challenge has generated some heat, but where there is heat there is the potential for light. This paper is an attempt to shed such light on it by examining some of the theoretical and practical implications of the situation.

Introduction: The Academic vs. the Practitioner Perspectives

The relations between the academic community and the Hindu community have recently come to be characterized by a sharp debate, which has also spilled over into journalism and the Internet. This development has been prompted by the reservations expressed by a significant number of Hindus in North America and India over the way Hinduism is portrayed in the Western academia and by the vigorous response of the academic community to such criticism.

As an academic, who is also a Hindu; or conversely, as a Hindu, who is also an academic, I (along with some of my other Hindu colleagues) stand at the volatile point of intersection between these two communities. This makes my role in the debate particularly fraught. I shall, nevertheless, try to address the issue or issues involved.

It seems to me that the issue first needs to be viewed on the broadest canvas possible, namely, that of the history of ideas.

Such a historical perspective is best developed by utilizing the distinction regularly drawn in the study of religion between the insider and the outsider, notwithstanding some problems of definition involved in invoking this distinction.¹ From the point of view of this distinction, the study of religion seems to exhibit a fourfold typology in terms of the modalities of transmission involved, in the context of how the study of the various religious traditions has proceeded over the past few centuries: (1) insider to insider; (2) outsider to outsider; (3) outsider to insider; and (4) insider to outsider.² The various religions flourished in relative isolation in the pre-modern era. Historians do warn us that perceptions of such isolation may be somewhat exaggerated, but no one has seriously challenged the view that the main channel of communication involving the various religious traditions during this phase was from insider to insider. This state of affairs began to change with the rise of the West and the onset of the modern era. During this phase, as the West became familiar with the religions of the Americas, Africa, and Asia, one main mode of transmission about these religions became one from outsider to outsider even as the other continued. Western scholars, outsiders to these various religious traditions, began sharing their knowledge about them with other Westerners, who were as much outsiders to the religious traditions they were receiving information about as those providing it. The West, however, began to control the intellectual discourse in its colonies as Western domination of the world became institutionalized in the form of colonialism, and the insiders to these traditions began to be profoundly affected, even in their self-understanding of their own religious traditions, by Western accounts.³ Thus another dimension was added to the manner in which religious communication was taking place – from outsider to insider. This age of European imperialism had run its course

¹ McCutcheon (1999).

² Sharma (1985).

³ Sharma (2006).

by the end of the Second World War and the direction of the discourse took yet another turn with the liberation of the former colonies. The members of the various non-Western religious traditions began to challenge their colonial descriptions in the post-colonial world. Now the insiders themselves began to claim the right to tell the outsiders about their faith, thus reversing the flow of information from outsider to insider, to insider to outsider.

The present tensions arguably reflect the state of discourse about Hinduism at this cusp of insider to outsider.

Current Perspectives: Tides of Change

If the perspective presented above possesses some merit, then we now stand at a turning-point in the relationship among the interlocutors in the study of religion. Historical changes, however, are not linear even when their direction is discernible. Historical changes are more like the changes in ocean flows caused by tides. It is sometimes not apparent that the tide has begun to turn, even when it has. And even as the tide advances there are backflows, which tend to confuse the onlooker. Such a tidal shift also generates eddies and undercurrents. The going is not always as smooth as at high tide, when the scene takes on a serene aspect and the ocean seems to bare its bosom to the moon, as Wordsworth might say.

This metaphor, if not off the mark, may serve to both illustrate and explain the messiness of the present situation. However, although it might make it more understandable, it does not make it easier to deal with, for many issues demand our attention at the same time.

One is thus forced to be selective, one hopes without being arbitrary. I would like to identify nine such issues that stare us in the face. I hope these issues will resonate with the readers

independently of whether they belong to the academic community or the Hindu community. I shall employ a rubric to encapsulate the key point of each of the issues I wish to foreground, in the hope that the expressions being employed to describe them will become increasingly clear as we proceed. These nine encapsulating expressions are the following:

1. The Response Threshold
2. Cognitive versus Non-cognitive Approaches
3. Bias and Error
4. The Genetic Fallacy
5. The Observer Effect
6. The Distinction between an Academic and a Polemical Work
7. The Idea of *Pūrvapakṣa*
8. Objectivity as an Academic Desideratum
9. Actor and Spectator

1. The Response Threshold

We owe this expression to Professor Eric J. Sharpe⁴. He writes:

A “response threshold” is crossed when it becomes possible for the believer to advance his or her own interpretation against that of the scholar. In classical comparative religion this was hardly a problem, since most of the scholar’s time was spent investigating the religions of the past and often of the very remote past. Interpretations might be challenged, but only by other specialists working according to Western canons and conventions. Today, by contrast, a greater proportion of study is devoted to contemporary, or at least recent, forms of living traditions. The study of religion often shades into a dialogue of religions, in which the views of both partners are (at least in theory) equally important. The response threshold implies the right of the present-day devotee to advance a distinctive

⁴ Sharpe (1987).

interpretation of his or her own tradition – often at variance with that of Western scholarship – and to be taken entirely seriously in so doing.

What one is thus experiencing now in the academic world is the crossing of the response threshold by the Hindu community in North America and India. This community in North America has reached the critical demographic mass, when its reactions can no longer be disregarded; it is also displaying a new assertiveness in India. As teachers of religion we have perhaps already had our own experience of the response threshold being crossed by our students, when we have fielded questions from those who belong to the very faith about which we are teaching them.

This raises the question: How should members of the academic community react when members of the faith community, and not just members of the student community or colleagues in the academic community, cross the response threshold? The answer to this question is now in the process of being formulated.

2. Cognitive Versus Non-Cognitive Approaches

It is clear from the documentation around this debate that the protest is not always about the facts that may be adjudicated on the basis of evidence but often about interpretations, which do not seem susceptible to such verification. The main achievements of modern science proceeded from the falsifiability of its hypotheses but such does not seem fully applicable to the case here. We thus need to distinguish clearly between cognitive and non-cognitive approaches to the study of religion: “When we assert that what we take to be a fact (or deny what is alleged to be a fact), we are using language cognitively. ‘The population of China is one billion,’ ‘This is a hot summer,’ ‘Two plus two makes four,’ ‘He is not here’ are cognitive utterances. Indeed, we can define a

cognitive (or informative or indicative) sentence as one that is either true or false.”⁵ Thus the statement that ‘Sanskrit is the language in which many sacred texts of Hinduism were composed’ represents an example of the cognitive use of language. “There are, however, other types of utterances which are neither true nor false because they fulfill a different function from that of endeavouring to describe facts.”⁶ When it is proposed that ‘Sanskrit is the language which contributes to social and political oppression,’ then this statement cannot be said to be true or false in the sense that the statement about it ‘being the language in which many sacred texts of Hinduism were composed’ could be considered to be so. When we ask whether a claim is cognitive or non-cognitive, the “query at once divides into two: (1) Are such sentences intended by their users to be construed cognitively? (2) Is their logical character such that they can, in fact, regardless of intention, be either true or false?”⁷ Once the Western presentation of the tradition, which happens to be non-cognitive in nature, is attacked by the followers of the tradition, the non-cognitive approach may be far more open to frisson than if the cognitive approach were being employed. One could perhaps appeal to the verdict of the “academic community” on the point, just as one might determine the stance of a “faith community.” However, the fact that the approach is non-cognitive, which is to say non-falsifiable in the usual sense, either historically or phenomenologically, does seem to suggest that a new set of criteria might be required to assess it. This makes the study of religion less of a science to that extent, and more of an art. It also complicates claims to academic freedom, for how is one to adjudicate the charge of the community that, in a particular instance, an exercise in academic freedom has degenerated into an exercise in

⁵ Hick (1990).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

academic licence, and that the exercise in academic licence, in turn, has further degenerated into an exercise in academic licentiousness?

The current controversy thus enables us to identify a new challenge: How to adjudicate difference of opinion, sometimes sharp, between the academic and faith communities, with criteria ideally acceptable to both, when the non-cognitive use of language is involved?

3. Bias and Error

It has been alleged during this debate that some, or even many, academics are either biased or in gross error when dealing with some aspects of Hinduism. However, fallibility is a human condition – no one is either infallible or capable of achieving Archimedean objectivity. Both common sense and humanity demand that some procedures be devised in our field for distinguishing between random human error and error caused by bias (conscious or unconscious).

The task might appear insurmountable on the face of it, but there is good news. Statistics as a science is concerned with, and indeed has, evolved ways of distinguishing between random error and systematic error (or bias) through the process known as hypothesis-testing.⁸ It is a pity that for all the popularity statistics enjoy, no one has been willing to give this scientific turn to the discussion of Orientalism. What one needs is a data bank of examples of (alleged) biases and errors pertaining to a work, an individual scholar, or to the field in general. This will make it at least theoretically possible to identify both Orientalist as well as chauvinistic excesses in the current discourse perpetrated by “outsiders” and “insiders” respectively.

⁸ Moore and McCabe (2002).

The current situation thus enables us to identify a third new challenge: the need for creating a data base for which the following acronym is proposed: ASBESTOS (Archives for the Study of Bias and Error in the Study and Teaching of Religions). As applied to Hinduism, it should document instances of bias and error identified by concerned parties, both in the Western presentation of Hinduism as well as in the presentation of Hinduism by the Hindus. This will level the playing field and provide the basis for achieving greater academic objectivity, an aim worth pursuing even if we think it is an aim which can only be approached asymptotically.

4. The Genetic Fallacy

Members of both the Hindu and the academic community have expressed deep distress at the ad hominem nature of the attacks levelled on by the members of the two communities. The Hindu community wonders if the academic community can ever evoke Hinduism without condescension and the academic community wonders if the Hindu community can evoke Hinduism without sentimentality.

The concept of genetic fallacy provides us with the intellectual basis for dispensing with ad hominem attacks. Philosophers have long insisted that the falsity or validity of a proposition can only be determined by examining the proposition on its own merits, irrespective of the source. One philosopher offers the following telling, if homespun, illustration of the genetic fallacy: the theory of relativity (either special or general) is false because Einstein was not a good husband. Character assassination can kill the person (metaphorically speaking) but not the proposition.

This is not to say that a person's background has no bearing on the discussion, for, after all, an expert's statement may not always be treated the same way as that of one who is not. But

such background only affects the credibility of the proposition, not its truth or falsity. After all, experts can also commit mistakes.

Thus both communities might wish to steer clear of genetic fallacy.

The controversy under discussion has generated much heat. But where there is heat there is also the possibility of light.

5. The Observer Effect

The Observer Effect refers to the phenomenon of what is observed being changed by the mere fact of being observed by the observer. This is a well-known principle in modern physics. In order for an electron to be observed it has to interact with a photon but as a result of this the path of the electron is invariably altered. A more homespun example of this is provided by the example of measuring the pressure of one's tire. Some air has to be released in order for the pressure to be measured which means that the amount of air in that tire has been affected in the very process of trying to measure it.

If we apply this principle to the study of religion, then it leads to the suggestion that students of religion may affect a religion in the very process of studying it. This principle provides a basis for examining the fear of the Hindus that Western scholars may be altering Hinduism in the very process of studying it, and that the change thus brought about is not for the better. For instance, the pious follower of Vīraśaivism, or indeed even of other forms of Śaivism, might begin to feel that some Western scholars, by proposing that the śiva-liṅga is phallic in nature, may be importing this 'phallacy' into Hinduism. Similarly, this principle also provides a basis for examining the fear of Western scholars that the Hindu community, by the very fact of placing them under the lens of

observation, may be compromising genuine scholarship. This would be the case, for instance, if Western scholars started practising self-censorship for fear of arousing the wrath of the Hindu community by their writings.

The operation of this principle may be unavoidable in a globalised world but it is good to be aware of it.

6. The Distinction between Academic and Polemical Work

I think we need to distinguish clearly between an academic book or article and a polemical one. An academic book or article aims at investigating an issue in a detached and even-handed manner and ideally presents as much evidence as possible, and as many perspectives as possible, which can be brought to bear on an issue, before offering a conclusion of its own. The aim of a polemical book or article is different. It is to provoke a discussion of the issue rather than analyze the issue in this way.

The criteria for judging a book or article will differ, depending on whether the book or article claims to be an academic work or a polemical work. An academic book or article will have to be judged on the basis of what could be called *pramāṇa* and *siddhānta*. The criterion of *pramāṇa*, or evidence, addresses the issue of whether the relevant evidence has been presented or not. The criterion of *siddhānta* addresses the question of whether sound conclusions have been drawn on the basis of the evidence adduced. A polemical book or article, however, does not aim to address the controversy in a sober manner; it wants to start a discussion in a provocative manner. It might be wise here to distinguish between two points. One, whether a book or article claims to be an academic one and two, whether it deals with academic matters, but sets out to be polemical

rather than academic work. The fact that it merely deals with academic matters does mean that it must be considered an academic book or article.

Books or articles by members of the faith community could be challenged on the ground that the author is not an academic in the same sense that a scholar is, because the author is not formally an Indologist. While the point whether the author could be considered academic or not may be disputed, the author's right to challenge scholars as the practitioner of a particular religious tradition is far more difficult to call into question. Who can prevent the author from exercising his/her own "freedom of expression," as enshrined in human rights discourse, a category much broader than that of "academic freedom"?

7. The Idea of *Pūrvapakṣa*

The idea embodied in this word is usually used in Indian intellectual discourse to describe the initial position which needs to be refuted, before the main thesis can be established. One begins with the objections that could be raised against the intellectual effort being undertaken, and then proceeds to examine and hopefully answer these objections in order to create the intellectual room for the scholar to present his/her own thesis. The seriousness and thoroughness with which the opponent's point of view is presented in Hinduism can be quite striking. (Sometimes the positions of the opponents are presented so effectively that the reader begins to wonder how the scholars are going to climb out of the pit they have diligently dug for themselves).

This concept of the *pūrvapakṣa* may be related to the current issue in the following way. When Western scholars started reconstructing the history of ancient India they treated the traditional account of it as the *pūrvapakṣa*, as the preliminary position which has to be presented

but dismantled. Similarly, modern critics of Western Indology are now using the presentation of Indian history and culture by Western scholars as their *pūrvapakṣa*.

8. Objectivity as an Academic Desideratum

The question of objectivity is often raised in the present context. Western scholarship claims to be “objective” in its depiction of Hindu religion⁹ as opposed to the presumably sentimental self-presentation of it by the Hindus. This claim of Western scholarship to objectivity has often been accepted by Indians in the past, especially because distance lends objectivity to bear on perspective and Western scholars are supposed to possess that epistemic distance which ensured it. Several points, however, have now been raised in this context: 1) It is all right if Indian scholars think that Western scholarship is objective, but can Western scholars claim that they are objective? For then the claim to objectivity itself becomes a subjective claim. 2) Hindus ask: Objectivity is fine but why is objectivity always used against us? Have Western scholars brought similar objectivity to bear either on their own culture/religion or on their own scholarship? After all, Western scholars are also located in a particular culture with its own history and presuppositions. 3) If we factor in the issue of motive in the context of objectivity, then we have to ask: what is the objective behind the exercise of objectivity? 4) Can someone be objective at one’s own expense? This question can be asked both of Western scholars and Hindu practitioners. The point is that when we claim objectivity we tend to assume that such objectivity transcends self-interest, but that

⁹ As Geoffrey Oddie points out: “During the European Enlightenment, religion was thought of (perhaps even more generally) as an objective reality – rather like natural objects (rocks, animals, plants) that could be explored, compared, and classified through scientific inquiry. A religion was ‘a system’ with shape and boundaries - one religion being clearly divided from another.” (See section on reference).

it does so cannot be taken for granted. 5) However, even if one accepts the validity of the criticisms of objectivity, should it not remain valid as an ideal?

That one should pursue one's academic interest with a certain detachment, so that one is guided by facts rather than by one's presuppositions, or by popular but erroneous beliefs, remains a commendable idea. Even if post-modern discourse insists that such objectivity is not possible, it can still remain an ideal to pursue. But need objectivity be the sole goal of scholarship? For instance, should we not assign some role to sensitivity as a competing or even an allied value? Something extremely significant is involved in the question. Objectivity is an ideal par excellence of scientific investigation. But science as such deals with physical objects. And this might be the right moment to discern a relationship between its claim to objectivity and the fact that it deals with objects. For the objects it typically deals with are inanimate objects. And even when it deals with an animate object such as a human body, it treats the body virtually as an inanimate object, with the body seen as being made up of limbs just as a machine is made up of parts.

Because the object is inanimate, or treated as inanimate, the object itself provides no input to the scientist. The scientist measures, analyzes, and dissects the object but the object has no voice in this procedure. And this makes sense because the inanimate object is not self-conscious. When we come to Humanities, however, our very object of investigation is a "subject" possessing a self, something which possesses self-consciousness. To provide a crude example: if I want to acquire knowledge of a stone I can weigh the stone, I can dissolve the stone, and I can subject it to chemical processes without having to take the stone's self-consciousness into account because it apparently has none. If, however, we want to acquire full knowledge of a human being, then can we do so by merely checking the person's height, weight, wardrobe size, and so on? In order to know a person we would have to know the person as a conscious being.

If we assume that the goal of knowledge is to acquire full knowledge about whatever is being investigated, then mere objective knowledge can provide accurate and adequate knowledge of physical objects. If, however, we also want to acquire full knowledge of something which is not just an object but possesses self-consciousness, then our very claim that we are acquiring accurate and adequate knowledge of that “thing” requires that we take the “thing’s” self-consciousness into account. If we do not do so then we are bound to fail in accomplishing our purpose.

Thus we run into the paradox that in order to acquire “objective knowledge” in Humanities we must include the subjective dimension of those whose knowledge is being sought in order to be objective. And now we come to the really interesting point that not only has the consciousness of what is being observed to be taken into account, we may also have to take into account the consciousness of those who are making the observation, which is hardly a consideration in the physical sciences.

9. Actor and Spectator

I started out by pointing out how fraught the role of someone like me is in this context, as one who is both a Hindu and an academic. I would like to examine the role of people like me further as I try to bring matters to a conclusion.

There are two ways in which one may view a religious tradition. One is as an actor, that is to say, as a person who is actually a part of the tradition, the kind of person we usually refer to as an insider. The other is as a spectator, that is to say, as someone who looks at the tradition from the outside and is therefore usually called an outsider. A person who is a scholar of one’s own tradition is in the position of being able to be both, an actor and a spectator, depending on the

situation. This realization tends to narrow the distinction between the insider and the outsider, as it creates room for the same person playing the two roles, thereby preventing any invariable association of the actor with the insider and of the spectator with the outsider with a distinct individual. What makes the position of the scholar-participant particularly interesting is that such a person can both be critical of one's tradition in a certain context and can also defend it in another, thus combining the analysis of the outsider with the advocacy of the insider in fertile tension.

It also highlights the fact that just as the insider can be both an actor, an active participant of a tradition, as well as spectator, an observer to one's tradition, an outsider also need not remain just a spectator but may also assume, through empathy, the role of an actor. Thus being an insider and an outsider no longer involves being different persons, it only involves the adoption of a different persona. This could be one way of challenging Levi-Strauss's claim that "no common analysis of religion can be given by a believer and a non-believer, and from this point of view, the type of approach known as 'Religious Phenomenology' should be dismissed."¹⁰

Conclusion

But why are we spending so much time in negotiating the differences that have arisen between the academic community and the faith community, or between the outsiders and insiders to a tradition. Why should each of the two parties not be content with dismissing the other out of hand? Why should they enter into a dialogue with each other, or we into a dialogue with them?

¹⁰ Levi-Strauss (1965).

I think the answer has to be that we cannot do so because both the insiders and the outsiders see truth and true knowledge perhaps arises at the point of intersection between these perspectives. It takes two to Tango but without the two there would be no dance.¹¹

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¹¹ Earlier drafts of the paper were presented at the Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, Cambridge, on October 20, 2016 and at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion at San Antonio, Nov. 19-22, 2016.