

Introduction to the Journal of Hindu Studies

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Every Italian schoolboy knows the famous opening verse of Dante's *Inferno*: 'Nel mezzo del camin de nostra vita/ mi ritrovia per una selva oscura,/ che la diritta via smarrita' which we might render 'halfway through the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood for I had gone away from the straight path'. As we move into the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, some of us feel that we have gone away from the straight path in the sense that the academic study of religions and the study of South Asian religions in particular, has become fragmented into area specialisms to such an extent that any discussion that cuts across disciplinary boundaries is rendered difficult if not impossible. While the development of specialisms is to be welcomed as a corrective measure to earlier overgeneralisations and vague pronouncements about 'Hinduism' that do not stand up to critical scrutiny, there is nevertheless a need for a forum or space where we can step out of our subject areas and talk to one another in a non-polemical, supportive environment which nevertheless promotes rigour in discussion and judgement. This is particularly needed in the post 9–11 world in which we live. Religion has become centre stage in public discourse, closely linked to cultural or identity politics, and now perhaps more than at any other time in recent history, there is a need for critical evaluation and discussion. The *Journal of Hindu Studies* is intended to provide such a forum for the study of South Asian religions that fall within the category 'Hindu'. We hope that discussion can take place across disciplinary boundaries and that questions raised in one area might be relevant to another. Anthropological concerns about kinship are surely relevant to textual concerns about plot, character, and narrative while textual prescriptions are surely relevant to fieldwork.

Our new journal, then, intends to raise questions and allow experimentation in the sense of looking at issues from new perspectives. We know how philological tools developed in the context of classical Greek and Latin texts have rendered incredibly fruitful results when applied to India, so it might be that theatre studies has something to tell us about dramatic performance in Kerala, narratology has something to tell us about the epics, or pragmatics has something to tell us about ritual. Similarly, the intellectual traditions of India have something to say to western philosophy, linguistics, and even mathematics and science. We feel that it is now time when more theoretical tools developed in literary theory, semiotics, phenomenology, or linguistics might be of use in the broad field of Hindu Studies. Our journal is intended to allow the application of theory and to provide a space in

which specialists can speak with each other across the divide of their expertise in the belief that cross fertilisation of ideas is healthy for the 'body politic' that is the academic study of Hinduism. *The Journal of Hindu Studies* has arisen out of conversations about these topics and the dawning needs to provide a forum in which critical questions can be discussed. Rather than focussing on particular ethnographies or texts, we hope that scholars will speak out from their areas to address issues of shared concern.

While the question of the viability of the category 'Hinduism' is itself germane, we hope that the category 'Hindu Studies' does not imply an essentialist understanding. Indeed, one of the aims of the journal is to reflexively scrutinise the terms of reference within which we operate and to promote, as it were, a dialogical relationship with our 'object' of study or between method and object. Indeed we need to look at Hindu Studies in very broad terms, especially in the contemporary context of globalisation, religious literalism, and in the shadow of a colonialism which has only recently gone away. The Italian word *selva* in Dante's opening lines can also be rendered as 'wilderness', in a way akin to the Sanskrit *aranya*. With this new journal we hope to create the conditions for discussion across areas of expertise; to move from the wilderness, or perhaps forest, to the town where we can reflect on what it is to be a Hindu, on what is entailed by the category, and on how we can present adequate descriptions. We have very high hopes for the *Journal of Hindu Studies* and trust that it will find a respected place within the academy. It is intended not to replicate any other journals about Hinduism but to provide something different. The journal will be thematised and non-thematised alternately, thus our first volume is thematised around the topic of hermeneutics while other volumes will look at historiography, ethics, philosophy, textuality, and so on. We hope that all colleagues across disciplines will find something of value in its pages and feel impelled to join in the debates.