

NETWORKING KNOWLEDGE AT THE CAMBRIDGE DHIIR: HISTORY, WORK AND ACHIEVEMENTS

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The DHIIR was set up through a generous benefaction from the Hinduja Foundation (UK), in memory of Dharam Hinduja (1969-1992), the son of Mr S. P. Hinduja, chairman of the Hinduja Foundation (UK). Protracted discussions on both sides of the Atlantic preceded the opening of the institute, with Prof Julius Lipner and Dr Julia Leslie playing key roles on behalf of the University of Cambridge and of SOAS (University of London) respectively. It is thanks to their selfless efforts, and to the many contributions of other discussants and supporters that the DHIIR was finally established. Throughout its time of activity, the institute held privileged relations with SOAS, and Dr Leslie was unwaveringly supportive of the institute's efforts and mission up to a few months before her untimely death in September 2004. Under the capable leadership of Prof Julius Lipner (1995-1999) and with the support of an outstanding Advisory Council,¹ the institute immediately became an important networking reference point on the international academic scene, and went on to play a leading role in representing Indic studies at Cambridge and in the UK.

Within the first year of DHIIR's existence Prof Lipner, supported by Dr Ian Whicher as Deputy Director, had given the institute a full administrative structure, set up six working groups headed by top academics,² and run two international conferences, one on the contemporary relevance of the *Bhagavad Gita*³ and one on the relationship between yoga and science. The themes of these first two conferences speak volumes about the interests and aims that lay at the heart of the DHIIR and, to some extent, set the tone for its future developments. The DHIIR, in fact, was set up to study the Indic traditions (that is, those religio-cultural traditions with deep roots in South Asia) according to the highest standards of scholarship, but with the special mission of sharing its research with the community at large in ways that could benefit people's lives. Hence the institute's emphasis on public participation, on topical subjects of contemporary relevance, and on dissemination of information. The institute's informative website, wide spectrum of publications and its eight public conferences are perhaps the best

¹ The original Advisor Council consisted of the following: Dr John Brockington (Dept of Sanskrit, University of Edinburgh), Prof Minoru Hara (Dept of Sanskrit, University of Tokyo), Mr S. P. Hinduja (Chairman, Hinduja Foundation), Prof Ursula King (Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Bristol), Dr Julia Leslie (Department of Religious Studies, SOAS, University of London), Dr Julius Lipner (Director, DHIIR, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge), Dr David Thompson (Director, CARTS, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge). Mr Jitesh Gadhia (ABN ANRI Corporate Finance) joined the group in April 1997.

² The six original working groups and convenors were as follows: *Veda and its forms* (Dr Dermot Killingley, University of Newcastle); *Dharma and gender* (Dr Julia Leslie, SOAS, University of London); *Rationality and practice* (Dr Ian Whicher, University of Cambridge); *Ritual and devotion* (Prof John Brockington, University of Edinburgh); *Challenges to the Veda* (Dr Gavin Flood, University of Wales at Lampeter); *Online resources for vedic studies* (Craig Jamieson, University Library, University of Cambridge). The groups underwent some changes over the last few years of DHIIR operation.

³ The proceedings of this 1995 inaugural conference were published as *The Fruits of our Desiring: An Enquiry into the Ethics of the Bhagavadgita for our times*, Julius Lipner ed. (1997, Bayeux Arts Publications).

examples of the ways in which direct interaction and dissemination of information were achieved.

DHIIR conferences became well known amongst academics, and were cherished by participants as fora where learned lecturers, practitioners (religious, professional, etc) and members of the wider public could come together, ask questions and share ideas and insights. Unique in atmosphere and form, they brought Indic knowledge systems to the fore in a well rounded way, and showed the important role that these play in today's world. Such outreach efforts were complemented by the publication of an *Indic Values Series* of pedagogic textbooks, edited by Julius Lipner. These have since proved extremely popular and stimulating due to their lively approach to topics that are at once steeped in Indic traditions and very gripping for today's imagination when they are, as in the present case, 'translated' into modern terms and related to day-to-day questions and problems. The series includes three titles: *Sita's Story* (by Jacqueline Suthren Hirst), *Guru Nanak* (by Eleanor Nesbitt and Gopinder Kaur) and *Stories of Krishna* (by Vivienne Baumfield). *Guru Nanak* was awarded the Shap prize in December 2000 for "making an outstanding contribution to the teaching of world religions",⁴ while the other two titles have been praised for their novel approach to interesting and well loved subjects.

In today's academia, networks of knowledge are established by way of publications and by way of personal meetings and communications at conferences and similar events. The DHIIR contributed richly to both of these aspects. The wide-ranging topics of the first five conferences raised the profile of the institute, and consequently of South Asian subjects, across the board. They had the great merit of bringing together a substantial number of internationally based academics, encouraging them to collaborate on questions of 'tradition vs modernity' in key areas of Indic knowledge, such as the 1998 conference on *Creating the Future: The Use and Abuse of Indian Role Models Today*.⁵ The millennial conference on *Devotion in the Indian Tradition*⁶ focussed on a topic which is nowadays deeply relevant while at the same time partly hidden, at times, under appearances or pretences of 'secularisation'. This conference acted as a hinge between two different 'phases' of the DHIIR. These were marked by a change of leadership from Prof Lipner to myself.

In June 1999 the DHIIR was guaranteed a further five years of existence. Its new charter provided the Institute with a sharper focus on research as it was agreed that future work would concentrate on one or more of the following areas: *multicultural concerns, health and medicine, and environmental issues*. My strategic decision was to concentrate on the first two areas, which were directly relevant to my study background and research expertise on the modernisation of yoga. Due to the excellent networks already established by Prof Lipner, I could concentrate on developing the administrative infrastructure of the institute and nurturing

⁴ The Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education, whose members are involved in the field of religious education from primary to university levels, is a forerunner in advising on and promoting a more perceptive understanding of world religions within the UK's education system.

⁵ The proceedings of this conference were published as: *Playing for Real: Hindu Models, Religion and Gender*, Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and Lynn Thomas eds. (2004, Oxford University Press).

⁶ The proceedings of this conference were published as: *The Intimate Other: Love Divine in Indic Religions*, Anna King and John Brockington, eds. (2005, Orient Longman).

its growth and research mission. A number of key administrative routines were streamlined, computer systems were updated and extended, and the first fully-fledged DHIIR website was launched in June 2001.

The ground-breaking DHIIR *Indic Health and Medicine Research Programme (IHMRP)*, focussing on Modern Yoga and on contemporary, ‘globalised’ Ayurveda, was launched in October 2000 to run through to the end of the Institute’s second term of office in September 2004. My own work had proved how under-researched the topics of modern and contemporary yoga were. It had also highlighted the fact that the newest forms of contemporary, ‘globalised’ Ayurveda were a relatively novel phenomenon, genealogically not totally unrelated to more recent, ‘cosmopolitan’ forms of yoga. I was keen to map how such histories had developed and informed each other, and how they related to more or less alternative, complementary and integrative forms of medicine. I also wanted to know through which belief systems (religious, philosophical, empirical, therapeutic...) they were being approached and interpreted, and whether there were differences between interpretations proposed by insider theorists and grassroots practitioners / patients. I was interested to know to what extent interdisciplinary academic exchanges had already taken place in this area, and I also wanted to try and foster more of them – even though I fully realised how difficult it can be for empirical sciences and humanities to find a common ground to work on, let alone share methodological premises. But has it even been said that pioneering work is easy? A lot of it is done through the only possible means: by trial and error.

The DHIIR gave me an excellent platform to strike out in all of these directions, and I am pleased to say that my ideas and proposals were greeted with enthusiasm from most quarters, and that the initial phases of my proposed research programme went through to very happy and successful completion. Even if we could not proceed beyond 2004 to a further phase of IHMRP, important links had been made. One recent example is the coming together, at the 2004 DHIIR Conference, of Prof Bala Manyam (a highly successful medical researcher keenly interested in Ayurveda, based at Texas A & M University) with Hinduja Foundation representatives. Many of us hope that this encounter will lead, in due course, to the setting up of high-quality empirical explorations of Ayurvedic drugs and principles.

The DHIIR staff, of course, was crucial in promoting and supporting all these activities. By September 2003 there were four of us enthusiastically working on yoga- and Ayurveda-related projects: Ms Dagmar Benner and Mr Mark Singleton were employed as Research Assistants specialising in, respectively, Ayurveda and yoga.⁷ Mrs Rajashree Dhanaraj, our Secretary-Coordinator, provided excellent administrative support and coordinated IT and office work smoothly indeed. Mark and Dagmar have since gone back to work on their PhDs, while Rajashree has moved on to a position of Senior Secretary at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. Like me, they agree that their time at the DHIIR was unique in terms of academic and professional advancement: the relatively short time that each one of us had at the Institute seems somehow to have been much more enriching than a purely calendar-based count

⁷ As selected examples of the work they carried out while at the DHIIR see: Dagmar Benner, entry on “Traditional Indian Systems of Healing and Medicine: Ayurveda”, in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. of work originally edited by M. Eliade, Chicago (forthcoming in 2005/2006); and Mark Singleton, entries on “Modern Yoga” and on various Modern Yoga schools in *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (CurzonRoutledge, forthcoming).

would allow for. We concluded that this must be related to the unique atmosphere, professional and research agenda that the DHIIR afforded: we were in fact guided by a unique combination of discipline and research freedom, while expectations of efficiency and quality output were high. We matched this with a remarkable mixture of dedication to, and expertise in, our subjects, focussing on key research aims that we communally pursued. ‘Research Group’ far from being just a label, was an everyday reality – but the best part of it is that our enthusiasm was contagious, thus enhancing sympathy and stimulating best effort and best practice in networking knowledge. Many people remarked on this special atmosphere after coming in contact with the DHIIR. Married to high methodological and analytical standards, the warmth of such human exchanges is often what propels good research forward, and while this is a well known fact amongst academic managers, only rarely it is explicitly acknowledged.

On such bases it is perhaps not surprising that our specialised research IHMRP events on yoga (2000-2002) and Ayurveda (2002-2004) were so successful. The ‘tandem’ formula of one specialist workshop followed by a public conference on the same topic seemed to work especially well, and I would recommend it to anyone who can implement it as very conducive to furthering aims on both the ‘specialised research’ and ‘dissemination’ sides. Our approach was to invite a number of qualified scholars to contribute work on a given subject area, and to exchange discussion papers *before* the workshop, so that discussion could proceed on the basis of read papers (this point is crucial in order to create deeper levels of discussion, and to make scholarly interaction more focussed and more productive). After discussion and exchanges at the actual workshop, speakers would present more finished findings and reflections in a public forum six to twelve months later. Throughout this period, discussions and interactions were supported by an e-mail discussion group managed by the DHIIR. This formula worked extremely well and allowed knowledge networks not only to become established, but to thrive over time – which they are still doing and will continue to do well beyond the duration of the Cambridge institute.

This led to many breakthroughs in research, and to the creation of further activities and networks. Notable examples of substantial DHIIR-related research results are to be found in a number of cutting-edge publications in the areas of modern yoga and Ayurveda.⁸ And on the side of further activities three examples will suffice: on the basis of the institute’s work I was invited to contribute to a government-funded research programme on the history of yoga run by

⁸ See for example several publications by Joseph Alter: *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Philosophy and Science* (2004, Princeton University Press); *Asian Medicine and Globalization* (ed. 2005, University of Pennsylvania Press); “Yoga at the *Fin de Siècle*: Muscular Christianity with a ‘Hindu Twist’” in *Muscular Christianity and Colonialism*, John J. MacAloon ed. (forthcoming, Routledge); as well as Ian Whicher, *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga* (1998, SUNY); Ian Whicher and David Carpenter (eds.), *Yoga: The Indian Tradition* (2003, RoutledgeCurzon; book based on the 1998 DHIIR workshop); Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (2004, Continuum); two articles – by Dagmar Benner and Joseph Alter – in the inaugural issue of IASTAM’s journal *Asian medicine: Tradition and Modernity* (2005, Brill); Mark Singleton “Yoga and the History of Relaxation” in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (20, 3, October 2005); and the proceedings of the 8th DHIIR conference (2004), as *Pluralism and Paradigms in Modern and Global Ayurveda*, by Dagmar Benner and Frederick Smith, eds. (forthcoming, State University of New York Press).

Maya Burger (Lausanne University) and Peter Schreiner (Zurich University),⁹ while more on the home front the institute's staff organised and ran a *Modern Yoga Reading Group* (March to June 2004) which was extremely successful in terms of academic and lay participation, and may well have paved the way for a further publication (under consideration). The third example is found in the unexpected outcome of the 2004 DHIIR conference on Global Ayurveda. We heard from one of the attendees, Nigel Hubbers, that the seeds for the formation of an ayurvedic professional body - the "Ayurvedic Practitioner's Association" (www.apa.uk.com), est. Spring 2005 - were sown at the conference. Several of the papers presented made attending Ayurveda students and practitioners aware of the impending changes in legislation regarding the use of herbal remedies and alternative therapeutic procedures in the UK. It became clear to them that if they wished to be able to practise Ayurveda in the UK they would have to organise themselves as a coherent professional group to present their case to the committees concerned with the new legislation. By providing inspiration, information and a community forum to individuals interested in Ayurveda, the DHIIR conference served as a starting point for creating a first network of practitioners and students.

I do not wish to go into too much detail about each of the events that took place as part of the IHMRP, suffice it to say that, in a certain sense, they put *Modern Yoga* and *Global Ayurveda* on the academic map as important and worthwhile topics of study and research. Many academic connections were created or given a new lease of life in the context of the IHMRP, and even a superficial look at the DHIIR's list of publications would show how productive such exchanges were. And as publications go on affecting academic discourses for years to come, thus contributing to the work of new generations of scholars, there is no doubt that in this and in many other ways the institute's work will continue to bear fruit well into the future.

⁹ The project, which started in September 2002, was dedicated to researching *Yoga between Switzerland and India: history and hermeneutics of a meeting*. It was funded by the Fonds National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique (FNS).