Hinduphobia in Academia: Orientalism, Tantra and Sanātana Dharma

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Epistemic Asymmetry and the Dogmas of Orientalism

Criticism of religious institutions, historical hierarchies, and political mobilizations is an indispensable function of the modern university. A living religious tradition neither requires nor benefits from intellectual insulation. Within classical Indic philosophy, the discipline of आन्वीक्षिकी (*ānvīkṣikī*, critical and rational inquiry) mandates that a scholar articulate the पूर्वपक्ष (*pūrvapakṣa*, the opponent's strongest possible argument) with complete fidelity before attempting a refutation (Ganeri xiii–xvii; Matilal 353–358). Academic Hinduphobia arises not from critical inquiry itself, but from a persistent hermeneutical asymmetry in the global study of religion. Under the working definition formulated at the 2021 Rutgers University conference, Hinduphobia comprises a set of antagonistic and reductive attitudes toward Sanātana Dharma (सनातन धर्म, the eternal spiritual order) and its practitioners (*Understanding Hinduphobia*). Within scholarly literature, this prejudice manifests most durably as epistemic desacralization: the systematic translation of Hindu metaphysical, liturgical, and contemplative categories into symptoms of primitive psychological regression, erotic pathology, or authoritarian manipulation, while the secularist, psychoanalytic, or materialist presuppositions of the interpreter remain exempt from comparative scrutiny.

In his seminal essay "On Dogmas of Orientalism," the philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal diagnosed the root of this asymmetry as a structural prejudice that posits an ontological divide between a rational, scientific, and self-reflective West and an intuitive, mythical, and non-rational East (Matilal 353–363). When this colonial division of intellectual labor governs religious studies, European and American theoretical models are treated as universal instruments of explanation, whereas Sanskrit and vernacular Hindu texts are treated merely as raw ethnographic data awaiting diagnosis.

Contemporary scholarship sometimes collapses the distinction between Hinduism, a historically pluralistic constellation of philosophical, devotional, and soteriological traditions, and *Hindutva*, a modern ideology of political nationalism. Although political ideologies and the exercise of state power legitimately invite critical scrutiny, a methodological distortion arises when opposition to contemporary nationalism becomes a pretext for discrediting the religious traditions themselves. Hindu sacred geography, devotional music, and Tantric liturgy possess theological, ritual, and historical meanings that cannot be exhausted by their contemporary political appropriations.

Equally reductive are colonial and neo-Orientalist representations of Hinduism as an incoherent assemblage of primitive polytheistic cults. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (6.11), for instance, articulates a sophisticated conception of divine unity that accommodates both immanence and transcendence:

एको देवः सर्वभूतेषु गूढः सर्वव्यापी सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा ।
कर्माध्यक्षः सर्वभूताधिवासः साक्षी चेता केवलो निर्गुणश्च ॥ ६.११ ॥

eko devaḥ sarvabhūteṣu gūḍhaḥ sarvavyāpī sarvabhūtāntarātmā |
karmādhyakṣaḥ sarvabhūtādhivāsaḥ sākṣī cetā kevalo nirguṇaś ca || *6.11* ||

The one Divine Being, hidden in all creatures, all-pervading and the indwelling Self of all; the overseer of actions, the abode of all beings, the witness, the conscious knower, the Absolute, beyond all qualifying attributes. (Author's translation; cf. Olivelle 431)

The verse does not abolish the theological plurality of Hinduism, nor does it prescribe a single metaphysical interpretation. Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Śaiva-Śākta traditions differ in their accounts of divine unity, cosmic multiplicity, and the relation between consciousness and ultimate reality. Nevertheless, the Upaniṣadic conception of the divine as *sarvabhūtāntarātmā* (the indwelling Self of all beings), *sākṣī* (witness), and *cetā* (conscious knower) decisively

challenges any historiography that reduces Hindu religious thought to pre-rational animism. The issue is not whether Hinduism accommodates multiple forms of worship, but whether academic interpretation can acknowledge their philosophical depth without subordinating them to predetermined ideological categories.

Case Study One: Erich Neumann, Mā Kālī, and the Metaphysics of *Kuṇḍalinī*

Twentieth-century depth psychology offers a revealing example of how Hindu sacred imagery could be assimilated into ostensibly universal hierarchies of consciousness. In *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1955), Erich Neumann places Mā Kālī (मा काली) at the negative pole of the "Terrible Mother" archetype, alongside the Greek Gorgons, Hecate, and various demonic figures. He associates these manifestations with primitive or "preconfigurative" stages of consciousness, thereby interpreting religious iconography through a psychological developmental schema (Neumann 80).

Neumann's method becomes especially apparent in his analysis of Kālī's iconography. Comparing a serpent encircling the Goddess's waist with analogous motifs in Greek, Minoan, and Mesoamerican representations, he reads it as a symbol of the womb in its "deadly aspect." Her protruding tongue similarly becomes an emblem of monstrous femininity through comparison with the Balinese Rangda and the Greek Gorgons (Neumann 151–52). Here, comparative morphology displaces philological and liturgical interpretation. By classifying Kālī primarily through cross-cultural archetypes of terror, Neumann privileges the psychological significance assigned by the interpreter over the metaphysical meanings articulated within Śākta traditions. The problem is not comparison itself but its elevation into an apparently exhaustive explanation. Extending Jan Assmann's account of the "Mosaic distinction" between true and false religion (Assmann 21), one might argue that depth psychology reproduces, in secularized form, an older structure of religious othering: what

missionary polemics classified as demonic idolatry becomes, in psychoanalytic discourse, a manifestation of archaic or regressive consciousness.

A different hermeneutic emerges from the primary literature of Śākta Tantra. Within Kālīkula theology, Kālī's association with *kāla* (काल, time and death) encompasses not merely destruction but transcendence of temporality and the possibility of *mokṣa* (मोक्ष, liberation). Likewise, although the serpent in Kālī's iconography cannot invariably be equated with Kuṇḍalinī, its symbolic possibilities cannot be exhausted by Neumann's association with a deadly womb. The Tantric understanding of *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti* (कुण्डलिनी शक्ति), the coiled divine power, provides a striking counterpoint.

Long before Neumann's study, Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon) had made available Pūrṇānanda's *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* (षट्चक्रनिरूपण), composed in Bengal in 1577 as part of the *Śrītattvacintāmaṇi*. Verses 10–11 describe Kuṇḍalinī through an elaborate imagery of serpentine repose, lightning, poetic speech, and the sustaining rhythm of life:

तस्योर्ध्वे बिसतन्तुसोदरलसत्सूक्ष्मा जगन्मोहिनी
ब्रह्मद्वारमुखं मुखेन मधुरं संछादयन्ती स्वयम् ।
शङ्खावर्तनिभा नवीनचपलामालाविलासास्पदा
सुप्ता सर्पसमा शिवोपरि लसत्सार्धत्रिवृत्ताकृतिः ॥ १० ॥

कूजन्ती कुलकुण्डली च मधुरं मत्तालिमालास्फुटं
वाचां कोमलकाव्यबन्धरचनाभेदातिभेदक्रमैः ।
श्वासोच्छ्वासविभञ्जनेन जगतां जीवो यया धार्यते
सा मूलाम्बुजगह्वरे विलसति प्रोद्दामदीप्तावलिः ॥ ११ ॥

tasyordhve bisatantusodaralasatsūkṣmā jaganmohinī
brahmadvāramukhaṃ mukhena madhuraṃ saṃchādayantī svayam |
śaṅkhāvartanibhā navīnacapalāmālāvilāsāspadā
suptā sarpasamā śivopari lasatsārdhatrivṛttākṛtiḥ || 10 ||

kūjantī kulakuṇḍalī ca madhuraṃ mattālimālāsphuṭaṃ
vācāṃ komalakāvyabandharacanābhedātibhedakramaiḥ |
śvāsocchvāsavibhañjanena jagatāṃ jīvo yayā dhāryate
sā mūlāmbujagahvare vilasati proddāmadīptāvaliḥ || 11 ||

Above the Svayambhu-liṅga dwells Kuṇḍalinī, subtle and radiant as the fibre of a lotus stalk, the World-Bewilderer, gently covering the entrance to Brahman with her mouth. Resembling the spiral of a conch and flashing like a garland of fresh lightning, she rests upon Śiva, coiled three and a half times like a sleeping serpent (10).

Sweetly humming like a swarm of intoxicated bees, Kula-Kuṇḍalinī gives rise to the manifold forms and cadences of poetic speech. Through the alternating movements of inhalation and exhalation, she sustains the vital principle of all beings, shining within the cavity of the root lotus as a dazzling radiance."

(Author's translation; *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* 10–11; Woodroffe, *The Serpent Power*, Second Section, 13–16; commentary 346–51.)

The contrast is hermeneutically significant. Whereas Neumann reads the serpent principally through the symbolism of death and the threatening maternal unconscious, Pūrṇānanda presents the coiled Goddess-power as luminous, generative, and inseparable from the emergence of language and the maintenance of life. The imagery of *navīnacapalāmālā* (a garland of fresh lightning), *kāvyabandharacanā* (poetic composition), and *śvāsocchvāsa* (inhalation and exhalation) locates serpentine symbolism within a coherent metaphysics of divine immanence.

This reading does not invalidate comparative psychology, nor does it deny Kālī's terrifying iconographic dimensions. Rather, it exposes the limitations of an interpretive framework that assigns psychological meaning without sufficiently engaging the theological categories through which practitioners understand their own tradition. The fundamental failure of such Orientalist hermeneutics is not that they interpret Hindu symbols from outside, but that they risk mistaking an external interpretation for the full meaning of the sacred. Also, we must note that is historically implausible that Neumann was unaware of the metaphysics of Kuṇḍalinī. Writing in the 1950s within C. G. Jung's immediate circle, Neumann had direct

access both to Jung's 1932 Zurich seminars on Kuṇḍalinī Yoga and to the extensive English translations and commentaries published decades earlier by Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), notably *The Serpent Power* (1919). Earlier still, German Idealists and Romantic philologists had engaged deeply with Sanskrit primary sources. Neumann's assimilation of Mā Kālī to the Balinese Rangda witch and the Greek Medusa cannot therefore be excused as innocent archival ignorance. Just as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* exposed the pseudo-scientific absurdity of colonial craniometry, contemporary scholarship must expose the absurdity of reducing the cosmic sovereign of Śākta metaphysics to a primitive fertility or underworld fetish.

Case Study Two: Historiography, Ethnography, and Political Reductionism in the Study of Yoga and Tantra

Whereas Jungian depth psychology subordinated Hindu deities to an evolutionary hierarchy of the unconscious, influential strands of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century North American Indology have subordinated Hindu traditions to narratives of erotic transgression, occult predation, or nationalist micropolitics. Although scholars such as Wendy Doniger (1998, 2026), Jeffrey J. Kripal (1995), David Gordon White (2003, 2009), and Hugh B. Urban (2024) do not derive their methodologies directly from Neumann, their works exhibit a parallel hermeneutical priority: external theoretical vocabularies (Freudian psychoanalysis, Foucauldian power analysis, or subtextual narrative inversion) frequently override the epistemological categories of the traditions under study.

Consider the historiographical method of David Gordon White's *Sinister Yogis* (2009) alongside his earlier *Kiss of the Yoginī: "Tantric Sex" in Its South Asian Contexts* (2003). In *Kiss of the Yoginī*, White argues that the ingestion of sexual fluids in transgressive Kaula rituals constitutes the original, defining core of South Asian Tantra, characterizing the high non-dual metaphysics of Abhinavagupta as a later elite attempt to "prettify" Tantric

practice (White, *Kiss of the Yoginī* 12–16). In *Sinister Yogis*, White extends this methodological selectivity to the history of Yoga. In *Sinister Yogis* (2009), particularly in the chapter "Ceci n'est pas un Yogi," White challenges the modern tendency to identify Yoga predominantly with meditation and contemplation, arguing that this interpretation privileges particular philosophical and elite traditions over a more heterogeneous historical record. Drawing upon medieval narratives, Sanskrit religious literature, and Perso-Arabic accounts, White foregrounds representations of yogīs as wonder-workers and practitioners of extraordinary powers, including the capacity to enter and control other bodies (*parakāyapraveśa*), at times through coercive means. His reconstruction consequently raises a significant historiographical question: whether the prominence accorded to spectacular and transgressive portrayals adequately represents the contemplative and soteriological dimensions of the wider Yogic tradition (White 38–82, 122–66, 198–254).

The methodological flaw in White's historiography is not that he studies folkloric narratives or Kaula ritual manuals, which are legitimate historical sources, but that he elevates picaresque fiction and transgressive fringes into the normative definition of the *yogī*, while dismissing the foundational philosophical canon as secondary distortion. In the classical *Yogasūtra*, Patañjali defines the nature and telos of Yoga at the very outset of the *Samādhipāda* (1.2–1.3):

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥ १.२ ॥

तदा द्रष्टुः स्वरूपेऽवस्थानम् ॥ १.३ ॥

yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ || *1.2* ||

tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe 'vasthānam || *1.3* ||

"Yoga is the stilling (or restriction and mastery) of the turnings of thought (*citta-vṛtti*) (1.2). Then the Seer (*draṣṭṛ*, pure awareness) abides in its own intrinsic nature (1.3)." (Author's translation; cf. Bryant 10, 16)

In Patañjali's system, as elaborated by Vyāsa, Vācaspati Miśra, and Vijñānabhikṣu, extraordinary powers (*vibhūtis* or *siddhis*, including the entry into another body mentioned in *Yogasūtra* 3.38) are explicitly classified in *Yogasūtra* 3.37 (*te samādhāv upasargā vyutthāne siddhayaḥ*) as obstacles (*upasargāḥ*) to true absorptive union (*samādhi*). By treating the cautionary byproduct (*vibhūti*) as the essence of Yoga and marginalizing *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, reductive historiography inverts the internal hierarchy of the tradition.

A comparable tension between external political framing and internal devotional meaning appears in ethnographic and performance-studies accounts of contemporary Hindu practice. In *The Path of Desire: Living Tantra in Northeast India* (2024), Hugh B. Urban offers an extensive historical and ethnographic investigation of Assamese Śāktism centered on the Kāmākhyā temple. While Urban documents Tantra as a living, evolving tradition, his interpretive frame repeatedly foregrounds political and economic contestation. Discussing the annual Ambubācī Melā (अम्बुबाची मेला, *Ambubācī Melā*, the festival marking the yearly menstruation of Goddess Kāmākhyā), during which the temple doors remain closed and visual display of the sanctum's pīṭha (पीठ, *pīṭha*, sacred yoni-stone) is forbidden, Urban links contemporary restrictions on visual access to "conservative religious and political sentiments" associated with "contemporary Hindu nationalist discourse" (Urban 156).

When evaluated against Clifford Geertz's principle of "local knowledge," which insists that cultural interpreters attend to the indigenous symbolic grammar through which practitioners themselves experience reality (Geertz 7–8), reading ritual non-display primarily through the lens of modern nationalist conservatism proves insufficient. As Carola E. Lorea and Rohit Singh demonstrate in *The Ethnography of Tantra: Textures and Contexts of Living Tantric Traditions* (2023), living Tantric lineages across Bengal, Assam, and the Himalayan borderlands operate according to deeply rooted norms of गोपनीयता (*gopanīyatā*, ritual confidentiality) and मर्यादा (*maryādā*, sacred boundary and filial reverence) (Lorea and Singh

17–18). For the Śākta devotee, Mā Kāmākhyā is approached during Ambubācī not as a political symbol, but as a living Mother resting in bodily seclusion. Filial modesty naturally precludes public visual display during her menstrual rest.

This displacement of devotional interiority by political performance theory becomes even more pronounced within segments of Indian academia. In *Spectacle State: How Hindutva Shapes Feeling and Culture* (2026), Jawaharlal Nehru University performance theorist Brahma Prakash examines how contemporary political power utilizes cultural forms, religious festivals, and media aesthetics in India. While analysing the intersection of state power and public performance is a recognized task of cultural studies, Prakash's framing repeatedly collapses the distinction between political *Hindutva* and the sacred lifeworld of *Sanātana Dharma*. Examining the Kumbha Melā (कुम्भ मेला, *Kumbha Melā*) at Prayāgarāja, Prakash characterizes the pilgrimage as a state-engineered theatre of mass spectacle and "massification," arguing that state renaming policies fabricated Prayāgarāja's aura as an ancient sacred city (Prakash 45–46, 60). Devotional music and public hymnody are similarly analysed under the rubric of "Sonic Hindutva" generating subjectivities out of empty performance and noise, while contemporary visual depictions of Hanumānji are read primarily through the lens of militant anger and political aesthetics (Prakash 117–118, 154–182). In a chapter titled "The Angry Hanuman: Anger as an Expression and Aesthetic Attitude" (154–182), Prakash characterizes contemporary iconography of Hanumānji (हनुमान्) and other deities as "infinitely angry" (155–156), complaining that the deity "looks more like Arnold Schwarzenegger than our monkey god" (157), while dismissing the wearing of kāṣāya (काषाय, *kāṣāya*, the ochre or saffron robe symbolizing renunciation) as merely "a sign of the times" (157). Discovering "the figure of Adolf Eichmann... from the judiciary to the

bureaucracy and beyond" (14), Prakash concludes that contemporary Hinduism has become "[t]he religion which remains very intolerant of other religions" (212).

Such an analysis overlooks two critical evidentiary realities. First, as Diana L. Eck has documented in *India: A Sacred Geography* (2012), the sanctity of Prayāga as *Tīrtharāja* (तीर्थराज, King of Pilgrimage Fords) at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā is attested continuously across the *Ṛgveda*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Purāṇas*, long predating modern electoral politics (Eck 145–152). Second, while state administrations undeniably organize logistics and seek political capital from massive public gatherings, the presence of state management does not evacuate the genuine मुमुक्षुत्व (*mumukṣutva*, longing for spiritual liberation) and भक्ति (भक्ति, *bhakti*, loving devotion) of millions of ordinary pilgrims. When humanities curricula in premier Indian universities train students (such as doctoral scholars in performance studies and student activists like Neha Bora at JNU's School of Arts and Aesthetics) exclusively within materialist and deconstructive frameworks without providing rigorous grounding in Sanskrit philology or indigenous hermeneutics, students are left without the conceptual tools to distinguish between transient political mobilization and enduring civilizational philosophy.

The concern is therefore not that political criticism of Hindutva is illegitimate, but that an exclusively political reading can reproduce the very epistemic asymmetry that critical scholarship professes to resist. An academy that trains students to deconstruct sacred performances without equally equipping them to understand Sanskrit texts, indigenous hermeneutics, and practitioners' theological self-understandings risks confusing the political uses of religion with religion itself. A rigorous study of Sanātana Dharma must distinguish between the power exercised through sacred symbols and the sacred realities those symbols disclose to their worshippers.

Case Study Three: Structuralist Semantics, Sonic Theology, and the Medical Humanities

Our third case study addresses the curricular imbalance in Indian higher education, where European structuralist and poststructuralist theories are routinely taught in isolation from classical Indic theories of language and mind. Across Indian departments of literature and philosophy, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* is taught as the foundational account of signification. Saussure's principle of *l'arbitraire du signe* (French: "the arbitrariness of the sign") posits that the bond between the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*) is purely conventional rather than intrinsic.

From a strictly philosophical perspective, Saussurean linguistics and Hindu sonic theology address different explanatory levels. Saussure provides a synchronic model for how conventional words function at the empirical, socially negotiated level of human speech, which Tantric grammarians term वैखरी वाच् (वैखरी वाच्, *Vaikharī Vāc*, corporeal, articulated speech). However, a profound pedagogical distortion occurs when humanities curricula elevate Saussurean structuralism (and its poststructuralist extensions in Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida) into a totalizing metaphysics that denies any ontological ground to language.

Against this linguistic nihilism, Mīmāṃsā, Vyākaraṇa, and Śākta-Śaiva Tantra articulate the metaphysics of शब्दब्रह्मन् (*Śabda-Brahman*, Ultimate Reality as Consciousness-Word), which holds that empirical speech is the outermost crystallization of luminous consciousness unfolding through four levels: परा (परा, *Parā*, transcendent, undifferentiated Supreme Speech), पश्यन्ती (*Paśyantī*, intuitive, visionary ideation), मध्यमा (*Madhyamā*, internal cognitive structuring), and वैखरी (*Vaikharī*, audible utterance) (Padoux 3–4, 166–222). In the opening chapter of the *Śāradātilaka Tantra* (शारदातिलक तन्त्र, 1.7), Lakṣmaṇadeśika formulates this cosmogony of sacred sound with mathematical concision:

सच्चिदानन्दविभवात्सकलात्परमेश्वरात् ।

आसीच्छक्तिस्ततो नादो नादाद्बिन्दुसमुद्भवः ॥ १.७ ॥

saccidānandavibhavāt sakalāt parameśvarāt |

āsīc chaktis tato nādo nādād bindusamudbhavaḥ || *1.7* ||

From the Supreme Lord (*Parameśvara*), Whose glory is Being, Consciousness, and Bliss (*sat-cit-ānanda*), and Who is *sakala* (associated with the creative *kalās* or germinal potencies of *Prakṛti*), emerged Śakti (dynamic conscious power); from Śakti arose *Nāda* (primordial sonic resonance), and from *Nāda* originated *Bindu* (the concentrated point of cosmic manifestation). (Author's translation of *Śāradātilaka Tantra* 1.7; Sanskrit text in Avalon, vol. 1, 2)

Within this Āgamic ontology, language transcends its merely representational function to become an instrument of soteriological transformation. The *Śivasūtra* (शिवसूत्र), attributed to Vasugupta and foundational to non-dual Kashmir Śaivism, opens its second section, *Śāktopāya* (शाक्तोपाय, the path of Śakti), with the deceptively simple aphorism:

चित्तं मन्त्रः ॥ २.१ ॥

cittaṃ mantraḥ || *2.1* ||

The mind is mantra.

In his *Śivasūtravimarśinī*, Kṣemarāja, the eminent disciple of Abhinavagupta, explains that *citta* becomes *mantra* not through mechanical repetition but through sustained awareness of supreme consciousness (*saṃvit*). The aspirant's mind, absorbed in the divine reality disclosed by the mantra, attains identity with its presiding consciousness. Mantra thus transcends a mere aggregation of phonemes: its traditional etymology combines *manana* (contemplative reflection) with *trāṇa* (liberating protection from phenomenal bondage) (Singh 83–85). Language becomes not an obstacle to realization but a means of overcoming the apparent division between knowing subject and ultimate reality.

This Āgamic conception of language invites a significant dialogue with Western theological hermeneutics. Henri de Lubac's recovery of the fourfold interpretation of Scripture demonstrates how sacred texts sustain interrelated literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings (de Lubac 1: 1–15). Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's dictum that "the symbol gives rise to thought" affirms the generative power of religious symbolism beyond literal or descriptive propositions (*The Symbolism of Evil* 347–57). Despite their divergent theological and soteriological premises, these traditions share a refusal to reduce sacred discourse to mere linguistic representation. Their convergence offers Indian religious scholarship a comparative hermeneutic in which language functions not simply as an object of interpretation but as a possible medium of existential and spiritual transformation.

The recovery of such interpretive frameworks also has important implications for Indian medical humanities, particularly at the intersection of existential meaning, psychological resilience, and contemplative practice. Empirical psychology increasingly recognizes the association between perceived purpose and psychological well-being. In their validation of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), Michael F. Steger and colleagues found that the *Presence of Meaning* correlated positively with life satisfaction and positive affect and negatively with depressive symptoms among undergraduate participants (Steger et al. 80–93). Extending this inquiry into population health, Aliya Alimujiang and colleagues examined 6,985 American adults aged over fifty and found that lower life purpose was associated with significantly higher all-cause and cardiovascular-related mortality (Alimujiang et al. e194270). Although these observational findings neither establish causation nor privilege any particular religious worldview, they underscore the importance of existential meaning as a

legitimate topic of psychological and medical research. Thus, denuding students of existential meaning, has negative ramifications discussed earlier in this essay.

Within this interdisciplinary framework, the *Bhagavad Gītā* offers a compelling classical account of existential disorientation and its resolution through philosophical dialogue. Its opening chapter, *Arjuna-viṣāda-yoga* (अर्जुनविषादयोग, the Yoga of Arjuna's Despondency), depicts a warrior overwhelmed by the apparent irreconcilability of familial affection, moral responsibility, and *svadharma* (स्वधर्म, one's particular ethical duty). Arjuna's anguish manifests somatically through trembling limbs (*sīdanti mama gātrāṇi*), a parched mouth (*mukhaṃ ca pariśuṣyati*), bodily shaking (*vepathuś ca śarīre me*), and an inability to stand as his mind reels (*na ca śaknomy avasthātum; bhramatīva ca me manaḥ*) (*BG* 1.28–30). The ensuing dialogue with Śrī Kṛṣṇa progressively reconfigures Arjuna's understanding of selfhood, duty, agency, attachment, and ultimate reality. Without anachronistically equating this soteriological discourse with clinical psychotherapy, the text permits a fruitful comparison with contemporary approaches to existential distress, cognitive reframing, ethical deliberation, and the restoration of purposeful agency.

Indian medical humanities can also interrogate the secular commodification of contemplative disciplines. The commercial presentation of Yoga and meditation as universally beneficial techniques of stress reduction frequently abstracts them from the ethical, pedagogical, and soteriological contexts within which they developed. Such decontextualization warrants scrutiny in light of documented meditation-related difficulties. In their mixed-methods investigation of sixty Western Buddhist practitioners, supplemented by interviews with thirty-two meditation experts, Jared R. Lindahl and colleagues identified fifty-nine categories of contemplative experiences across seven domains, including cognitive, perceptual, affective, somatic, motivational, self-related, and social disturbances. Some

participants reported severe anxiety, depersonalization, and substantial functional impairment (Lindahl et al. e0176239). Although the study cannot establish the prevalence of such effects or attribute them specifically to secularization, it challenges the assumption that contemplative practices are invariably benign.

Classical Indic traditions offer relevant resources for addressing these concerns. Pātañjala Yoga situates contemplative development within an integrated discipline encompassing ethical restraints (*yama*), observances (*niyama*), bodily discipline, breath regulation, concentration, and meditative absorption (*Yogasūtra* 2.29). Tantric lineages additionally emphasize *adhikāra-bheda* (अधिकारभेद, differentiation according to spiritual eligibility and competence), initiation, and qualified instruction, although their specific requirements vary across traditions. These principles do not constitute a substitute for modern clinical assessment; rather, they provide historically grounded models of graduated practice and contextual responsibility.

The task of an authentically Indian medical humanities is therefore neither to medicalize Hindu scripture nor to secularize its contemplative disciplines into therapeutic commodities. It is to bring indigenous epistemologies into critical dialogue with empirical psychology, clinical research, and philosophical hermeneutics—recognizing that human flourishing involves not merely the management of symptoms, but the cultivation of meaning, ethical agency, and existential coherence.

Conclusion: Institutional Charter for an Indian Academy of Religion

Overcoming the epistemic asymmetries of Orientalist scholarship requires more than reactive polemics; it demands institution-building grounded in philological and philosophical excellence. India urgently requires an autonomous Indian Academy of Religion (IAR)

anchored in its classical *śāstras* (शास्त्र) and living traditions, while remaining fully engaged with global methodological standards. Such an Academy should be structured around four core mandates:

1. **Philological and Commentarial Accountability:** Requiring training in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pāli, and regional Indian languages alongside systematic engagement with indigenous commentarial lineages (*bhāṣyas*), ensuring that primary texts like the *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa*, *Śāradātilaka Tantra*, and *Yogasūtra* are never misrepresented through secondary caricatures.
2. **Ethnographic Fidelity and Local Knowledge:** Partnering with living practitioner communities across urban, rural, and tribal India as epistemic interlocutors, respecting internal ethical boundaries such as *maryādā* and *gopanīyatā* at sanctuaries like Kāmākhyā, Tārāpīṭha, and Kālīghāṭa.
3. **Comparative Hermeneutics and Medical Humanities:** Fostering rigorous dialogue between classical Indic philosophies (Nyāya, Sāṃkhya-Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Trika Śaivism, and Śākta Tantra) and global philosophical, hermeneutical, and clinical sciences, advancing fields such as Indian medical humanities and safe contemplative pedagogy.
4. **Inter-Dharmic and Interreligious Hospitality:** Inviting Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and secular scholars into symmetrical scholarly exchange governed by shared standards of textual evidence and mutual intellectual respect.

By uniting commentarial depth with methodological transparency, an Indian Academy of Religion can move global Hindu studies beyond both reductive desacralization and uncritical nostalgia, restoring the intellectual dignity of the Divine Mother and the classical *darśanas* within the contemporary university.

Glossary of Key Terms

1. **Hinduphobia and Epistemic Asymmetry:** The working definition of *Hinduphobia*, developed at the 2021 *Understanding Hinduphobia* conference at Rutgers University, identifies antagonistic, derogatory, and prejudicial attitudes or behaviours directed against *Sanātana Dharma* and its adherents (*Understanding Hinduphobia*). In the present argument, epistemic Hinduphobia denotes a more specific form of intellectual prejudice: the systematic devaluation of Hindu philosophical, theological, and ritual traditions through interpretive frameworks that deny them the epistemic legitimacy routinely accorded to Western intellectual systems.

   Its defining characteristic is hermeneutical asymmetry. Hindu metaphysical claims are reduced to psychological projections, devotional practices to political performances, and sacred symbols to manifestations of primitive consciousness, while the psychoanalytic, materialist, or poststructuralist assumptions governing these interpretations remain exempt from equivalent critical scrutiny. Indigenous categories such as *Brahman*, *Śakti*, *mokṣa*, and *adhikāra* are consequently treated not as intellectually serious explanatory concepts but as cultural phenomena requiring external theoretical diagnosis. The problem is not the application of Western critical methodologies *per se*, but their elevation into universally authoritative interpretive systems that pre-emptively invalidate the philosophical self-understanding of the traditions they examine.

2. **The Dogmas of Orientalism:** A concept critically examined by the Indian philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal in his seminal essay "On Dogmas of Orientalism," which exposes the entrenched epistemological prejudice that constructs an artificial opposition between a supposedly rational, analytical, and scientific West and an

intuitive, mystical, and intellectually subordinate East (Matilal 370–76; cf. Ganeri xiii–xvii). Matilal challenges this civilizational essentialism by recovering India's sophisticated traditions of rational inquiry (*ānvīkṣikī*, आन्वीक्षिकी), systematic epistemology (*pramāṇa-śāstra*, प्रमाणशास्त्र), formal argumentation, and dialectical engagement through *pūrvapakṣa* (पूर्वपक्ष), the critical examination of an opponent's position. The *Nyāya* and *Navya-Nyāya* traditions, in particular, demonstrate that questions of knowledge, inference, logical validity, and linguistic meaning received sustained philosophical investigation in classical India.

Matilal's intervention is not a romantic inversion that elevates Eastern spirituality over Western reason, but a rejection of the very categories that monopolize rationality for one civilization while relegating another to mysticism. The fundamental dogma of Orientalism lies in treating historically constructed cultural distinctions as inherent differences in intellectual capacity. Its enduring consequence is *epistemic asymmetry*: Indian philosophical systems are approached as objects of cultural explanation rather than recognized as independent traditions capable of generating, testing, and contesting philosophical knowledge on equal terms.

1. **Woke Ideology, Marxism, and Susan Neiman's Neo-Kantian Critique:** In *Left Is Not Woke* (2023), the neo-Kantian philosopher Susan Neiman argues that contemporary "woke" ideology undermines the traditional Left by abandoning Enlightenment commitments to universalism, distinguishability of justice from power, and historical progress in favor of tribalism and Foucauldian power-reductionism (Neiman 2–15). While Neiman accurately diagnoses the epistemological relativism of poststructuralist identity politics, her purely Kantian framing underplays how contemporary intersectional discourse adapts the structural binary of classical Marxist conflict theory

(oppressor versus oppressed), transposing it from economic class onto fixed cultural and identity categories.

2. **Logical Positivism:** A twentieth-century philosophical movement originating with the Vienna Circle (including Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap) and popularized in English by A. J. Ayer. Grounded in the verification criterion of meaning, logical positivism held that a proposition is cognitively meaningful only if it is either analytically tautological or empirically verifiable by sense experience, thereby dismissing all metaphysical, theological, and ethical truth-claims as literal nonsense.
3. **Gender Trouble and Performative Deconstruction:** Developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), the theory of gender performativity argues that sex and gender are not stable ontological or biological givens, but effects produced through reiterated social and discursive performances (Butler 1–34). Within non-Western humanities curricula, the uncritical application of radical performativity theory often clashes with indigenous Śākta-Śaiva ontologies, in which masculine and feminine principles (*Śiva* and *Śakti*) represent complementary, ontologically real polarities of Consciousness and Power.
4. **Kuṇḍalinī Śakti in the *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* and *Gāruḍa Tantras*:** Contrary to Erich Neumann's portrayal of Mā Kālī's serpent as a regressive symbol of a "deadly" womb (Neumann 151–152), classical Śākta Tantra understands *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti* as the coiled, dormant energy of supreme consciousness residing in the *mūlādhāra cakra*. In Pūrṇānanda's *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* (vv. 10–11), she is celebrated as radiant like lightning, the source of poetic speech, and the sustainer of vital respiration (Woodroffe, Second Section, 13–16), while early medical Tantras such as the *Kriyākālaguṇottara* integrate serpent symbolism with clinical toxicology and *prāṇa* regulation (Slouber 57–58).

5. **Śabda-Brahman, *Vāc*, and Saussurean Arbitrariness: Śabda-Brahman, Vāc, and Saussurean Arbitrariness:** A fundamental divergence between Western structural linguistics and classical Indic philosophies of language involves the ontological status of the Word. Whereas Ferdinand de Saussure's principle of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign locates the relationship between signifier and signified within the conventions of a linguistic system, Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya* grounds language in *Śabda-Brahman* (शब्दब्रह्मन्), the ultimate, indivisible reality in which consciousness, meaning, and linguistic manifestation are intimately related. Bhartṛhari distinguishes three levels of speech—*Paśyantī* (पश्यन्ती, intuitive or undifferentiated speech), *Madhyamā* (मध्यमा, interior or mental speech), and *Vaikharī* (वैखरी, articulated speech)—which later Śaiva-Śākta traditions elaborate into a fourfold hierarchy by introducing *Parā Vāc* (परा वाक्), the supreme, undifferentiated Word identified with divine consciousness (Padoux, *Vāc*). This metaphysics acquires an explicitly cosmological dimension in the *Śāradātilaka Tantra* (1.7), which describes the emanation of *Śakti* (शक्ति, divine power), *Nāda* (नाद, primordial resonance), and *Bindu* (बिन्दु, the concentrated principle of manifestation). Speech is thus not merely a conventional system of signs but, at its deepest level, an expression of consciousness through which cosmic manifestation and spiritual realization become intelligible. The philosophical disagreement is therefore not simply whether linguistic signs are conventional, but whether language can be understood adequately without examining its possible ontological and soteriological dimensions. Saussure's theory explains the differential structure of linguistic signification; Śaiva-Śākta philosophy asks the further question of how the Word participates in reality itself and becomes a means of liberation. For my work on Saussure, see https://www.indiancatholicmatters.org/the-

refutation-of-saussures-signification-theory-as-a-foundation-for-interreligious-dialogue/

6. **Local Knowledge and *Adhikāra-bheda*:** "Local knowledge," formulated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (7–8), insists that cultural practices be interpreted through the indigenous conceptual categories of practitioners rather than external theoretical abstractions. In Hindu contemplative and ritual traditions, this internal grammar includes *maryādā* (sacred boundary and modesty), *gopanīyatā* (ritual confidentiality; Lorea and Singh 17–18), and *adhikāra-bheda* (graduated competence), which ensures that intensive yogic and meditative practices are matched to the psychological stability and readiness of the aspirant.

The author intends to expand this essay into a monograph on the Holy Mother of this and other bubbling universes.

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