

## **Infinity Foundation's Response to Sneha Mehta's Paper: "The Infinity Foundation and the Western Academy"**

Since the time allowed for this response by Prof. Hawley is very short, IF (The Infinity Foundation) is writing this response to only one of the three papers that were produced by Prof. Hawley's students about IF. We believe that this illustrates many of the problematic issues in the academy's approach to India in general, and Hinduism in particular.

The subject of the above paper, as stated by the student of Prof. Hawley is important: "to examine the relationships between the academics who study Hinduism and the subjects they study, when those subjects attempt to obtain agency in the world of the academics themselves, specifically in the case of Mr. Malhotra and IF."

However, the assumptions and the methodology used raise some very crucial questions that need to be settled before any such examination can intelligently proceed. For instance, one of the assumptions the author considers as "central" in her approach to understanding IF is (page 2): "The relationships between money, power, and knowledge operate in the same ways, regardless of whether they are in the context of the academy or of IF. Questions about sources of financial support and the influence of these sources on intellectual product can be asked of both sides, *and it is not accurate to say that one side is always more powerful than the other.*" (Our emphasis)

While an improvement on an earlier (unsubstantiated) statement by Hawley's students that implied that the balance of power was with IF, the current statement is disingenuous to say the least, and glosses over some very important and unresolved issues. An objective examination of the issue of financial support, power and influence of scholarship and knowledge distribution should begin with an examination of (i) the historical patterns of funding and power over research within the academy, (ii) the relative amounts of money disbursed by etic and emic sources over time, (iii) the current funding sources and their relative sizes, (iv) their stated objectives in funding the research, (v) an analysis of what topics get funded and why, (vi) the lenses used, in the form of the kinds of questions that are asked, and (vii) the portrayals of Indic civilization that win "official sanction" in the West, and become legitimized as the basis for further scholarship.

A preliminary hypothesis worth examining would be that etic sources are indeed much more powerful and many times larger than IF and other emic sources. IF's attempts to obtain data and scholarly openness on this issue have been stonewalled by scholars in RISIA.

Hawley's student mis-states IF's definition of Westology: "*These are part of a phenomenon that IF calls 'Westology,' in which the West looks at India through the lens of 'Indology.'*" This is a wrong and illogical definition. Simply stated, Westology is the systematic study of the West in which the outside (etic) perspective is equally represented, along the same lines as the field of Indology, even though Indology has been

largely the study of India from the outside. Later, on page 7, Hawley's student gives a definition inconsistent with the prior one on page 4 - the latter one being much closer to what IF means by this term.

Similarly, the paper asserts, "Mr. Malhotra says that 'Westology' is to study and document in a very authentic scholarly way; he also feels that the West is where power is and that therefore, the West should be understood. However, he does not believe that one can know the West from within itself, because it is biased and chauvinistic." This last statement is incorrect: Our position is that there need to be both emic and etic examinations of the West, and that the outsiders in this instance must not be under the control of Western funding or careers or legitimacy. The whole purpose of this would be to balance Eurocentrism with the views of the "others." We are not seeking an either/or approach.

The paper falsely states our position on Western scholarship as: "*Western scholarship has worn out its welcome in Indic studies, as if it somehow needs an invitation to stay.*" The fact is that IF has never tried to prevent western scholarship, and indeed the opposite is the case: IF has championed the expansion of scholarship about India, by also including voices that are from within the traditions, so that both sides may get equal representation. None of the forums where IF publishes are closed to the Western scholars – for example, anyone can post at Sulekha – but the reverse is not true.

It is the Western scholarship establishment that demands that native voices need an invitation to enter into Indology, be it as equals or otherwise. As an immediate example, after Dr. Krishnan Ramaswamy's questions and criticisms of methodology at Prof. Hawley's "Hinduism Here" mini-conference, he was given a handwritten note by one of Prof. Hawley's students: "I do think raising questions is important. I do not think it is *your place* to tell an individual what he/she should study and/or include in his/her scholarship" (our emphasis). Presumably, this was a reminder to "the Hindoo" to not forget his "place" as a native informant, and not to engage in the scholarly enterprise of framing research questions. Dr. Ramaswamy had never suggested regulating what anyone should study, but his challenges were processed as a threat. This kind of attitude in an Ivy League institution is disturbing, and is something that many academics such as Jack Hawley and others in RISA have not only failed to curb, but may have also have encouraged.

Most Western scholars' forums are closed to those who are not licensed by the West to be qualified as scholars or critics. For instance, Risa-l and other web lists controlled by Western scholars are closed to outsiders, as are their journals and conferences. Despite many offers to Hawley to have open debates and panels, where the scholars and diaspora would be equally represented, he has simply ignored these invitations. The above points have also been written to Hawley many times before, yet he continues to spread misinformation about IF wanting to suppress western scholarship. His students fail to mention that he continues to ignore the plea for equal representation for the Indic view from within.

We have also asked for a survey of who funds what and how much, so that the facts about the dominant funding of Hinduism Studies by Christian Institutions and Western Governments becomes more transparent. While most professions routinely conduct such surveys about their funding sources and trends, RISA has steadfastly refused to face this. One must wonder why. Give that over 90% of the funding of academic Hinduism Studies is estimated to come from non-Hindu sources, on what basis could the paper conclude that Westerners need “*an invitation to stay*”? Do colonialists seek any invitation?

In explaining the scope of IF, the paper disregards that IF is including Indian Christian and Indian Islamic scholars and issues. Also, the paper incorrectly states that IF publishes “*Education About Asia*”. It is published by *The Association for Asian Studies*.

In general, Hawley’s student seems to have a poor grasp of IF's relationship with the Diaspora. For instance, she claims (page 8): “...many NRIs have told Mr. Malhotra that his efforts in this capacity are unnecessary and rude.” This is a mis-quote of Mr. Malhotra. He had told Hawley’s students that when he first started to examine the academic scholarship being done, many Diaspora members dismissed the academy as being irrelevant to Hinduism, and that, therefore, IF’s efforts were considered “unnecessary.” After IF started to write about the academic (mis) portrayals, these same Diaspora members have started to see IF as the pioneer in this kind of critique of inequality. “Rudeness” was never mentioned.

Much of the rest of the paper tries to conduct an analysis of IF's academic activities. However, the examples picked are often tangential, and the issues are analyzed superficially - it is often hard to believe that a chaired professor of Dr. Hawley’s standing guided this paper.

On page 10, the paper says: “Since all the trustees of IF, as well as its founder, hail from the business world, it is no surprise that IF often conducts its intellectual work in business-like terms.” But Susheila Bhagat is an anthropologist, Dr. Ramaswamy is trained in Psychometrics and does Clinical Research, and Prof. Balagangadhara is an academic scholar in social sciences. The paper also seems to ignore that what it downgrades as “business-like terms” is also part of the academic world. For instance, another student in the same class, Michelle Moritis, repeatedly used marketing terms like “demographics”, “the value proposition,” and yet another student studying Divya Dham used business terms like “stake-holders.” One is left amazed at how incidental and irrelevant issues are turned into central ones, often using incorrect or out-of-context data.

Regarding women’s issues, Hawley’s student focuses entirely on one scholar, even though there is a diversity of material posted on the IF web site – such as by Ruth Vanita, an Indian Christian who champions a leftist position, and by many others from across the spectrum. It focuses on Madhu Kishwar, who is a well-known activist and scholar in India, and whose work and ideological positions precede the existence of IF by decades. IF is happy to see Kishwar’s projects in India become successful. However, Hawley’s student’s paper seeks to refute Kishwar by finding a quote from a single Dalit critic, and to then superimpose and assume this as a criticism of IF: “*The Dalit writer prefers*

*Buddhism and Dr. Ambedkar as his heroes, while the IF writer favors Hinduism and Saraswati. While the IF writer makes a point in saying that Hindus worship female deities as well as male ones, the Dalit writer, discussing the treatment of women in the real world, has a relevant point in illustrating a system of oppression maintained by this pantheon and in showing that the IF writer glosses over the everyday problems of women in India.*” The “IF writer” being referred to is Kishwar, who is hardly any more an “IF writer” than Hawley would be considered a “Ford Foundation writer.” Kishwar is definitely her own person, as anyone familiar with her long career would confirm.

The paper’s assessment of the *Kali’s Child* and the *Wendy’s Child* controversies is very superficial at best. An irrational conclusion, perhaps playing to the professor who assigns grades, comes in a blanket statement: *“The sheer volume of textual references provided by Kripal make his claims seem, to me, largely irrefutable.”* Since when did “sheer volume” of references become the gold standard of academic truth? Did the scholar bother to read Tyagananda’s 130-page point-by-point rejoinder, in which he claims that many of these “references” do not even exist or were manipulated translations? Hopefully, this undergraduate student will get superior academic guidance at some point in her studies, to be able to better evaluate evidence and logic, and to stay away from sweeping conclusions when she cannot do justice to the subject matter.

The praise for Kripal – presumably without having read the over 1,000 pages on this controversy – would be worthy of a back-cover endorsement for his next book: *“I do find myself believing Kripal’s claims of writing as a friend. He certainly tries to stay moderate.”* One must bear in mind that Kripal’s book got its main endorsement by Hawley, who guided the student’s paper.

Hawley’s student ignores the numerous experiences and resources available at Columbia University itself, which would support IF on many issues. For instance:

- I. Columbia University’s philosophy department refused invitations by its religion department to participate in Indian Philosophy on many occasions, because it does not regard Indian Philosophy as being philosophy at all.<sup>1</sup>
- II. IF and Columbia University did a joint Colloquium on Indic Traditions, at Woodstock, NY, in summer of 2003. The special Colloquium web site clearly indicates that its very premise was stated up front in all its materials and invitations, and this included the following statement of purpose:<sup>2</sup>
  - 1) *To critique the tacitly or overtly presumed intellectual superiority of the West, so as to put the dialogue between the Indic and the Western on an equal footing (while at the same time avoiding a reactionary triumphalism from the Indic side);*
  - 2) *To critique negative stereotypes of Indic traditions, assessing the damage such stereotypes cause, and to consider measures to counteract them;*

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Hawley knows this very well, and Gary Tubb alluded to it in his remarks on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See Invite Letter at Indic Colloquium site:

[http://www.infinityfoundation.com/indic\\_colloq/colloq\\_home.htm](http://www.infinityfoundation.com/indic_colloq/colloq_home.htm)

- 3) *To heal the breach between the Vedist and the Buddhist perspectives within the self-understanding of Indic civilization, in order to restore this civilization to its full dimensions;*
- 4) *To develop the materials for a deeper appreciation of the crown jewel of Indic civilization, its Inner Sciences (adhyatmavidya – including philosophy, psychology, epistemology, linguistics, and so forth), as supporting and supported by the Outer Sciences (“traditional knowledge systems”) and as crucial to creative revisions of history and society, and to develop styles of presenting these sciences as extremely commensurable with and highly valuable to the rebalancing and furthering of contemporary science in the global context.*

- III. Mary McGee, on the faculty of Columbia University’s religion department, has co-authored numerous works with Madhu Kishwar, and yet she was not even interviewed prior to reaching conclusions about Kishwar’s work.
- IV. Dr. David Grey and Dr. Tom Yarnall have received their PhDs from Columbia University’s religion department, and have each worked very closely with IF. Yet, they were simply ignored in the interview process.
- V. Probably the single most influential person over the years in shaping many of IF’s interests has been Robert Thurman of Columbia University’s religion department, and yet he was not even interviewed for this project.

Another unscholarly feature of the paper is the way in which comments by someone outside of IF are projected as being related to IF. For instance, the reference to a third party web post about the “*time to take out the sudarshan chakra*” is not properly explained in the paper, and leaves the reader wondering what its relevance is. In Indian narratives, the head often symbolizes the ego, and many Indian texts refer to bowing the head as a surrender of the ego, and the cutting off of the head as a permanent giving up of the ego. Therefore, asking powerful Western scholars to apply the sudarshan chakra should be interpreted as a call to give up their super egos. This was not properly interpreted in the paper.

The Warring States website comment quoted in the paper also needs much deeper analysis. China’s and Japan’s native scholars are not the only ones reclaiming the native’s right to answer back to the West, and to balance out the cross-cultural portrayal. This is not a case of two wrongs to make a right, but a case of wanting to present both sides fairly – which has been denied until now, given the asymmetry of power. It is no different than African-Americans, Native-Americans, and women, each demanding their right to self-representation in their cultural studies. These three groups have already gone through the similar battles and criticisms, and have achieved what Asian groups (including Japanese, Chinese, Indians, etc.) are now striving for. Similarly, Pagans and Wicca are reviving their pre-Christian religions in Europe and USA, by refuting Christian constructions of them. Roma are reclaiming their history back from their European oppressors’ accounts. Against this backdrop, the Warring States scholars quoted in the paper are those Western voices that are complaining about their loss of hegemony. Did colonizers ever give up their hegemony gracefully? When the dis-empowered start to write back, such whining is to be expected.

This version of the paper is a big improvement over the initial draft that was sent. Had it not been for the active engagement and argumentation on the part of many IF advisors, Hawley's project was proceeding in a very distorted manner. This leads to the following meta-level issue: If an institution in the West (such as IF) is denied dignity and treated thus (i.e. prior to IF's criticisms about Hawley's project), then *what should we think about the kind and level of scholarship that guides the effort of these very same intellectuals when they have a powerless and disadvantaged third world person as an informant?* Considering the effort required by IF to try to get even a chance to rebut and refute the skewed "scholarship," one shudders to think of the plight of those in the third world who do not have the resources or abilities to complain, who do not get to see what was written about them, and who can easily be materially enticed to keep quiet. This is indeed a matter of grave concern about the legitimacy and ethics of some kinds of scholarship.

Indeed, Ms. Mehta acknowledges the discomfort of the Western scholars of Hinduism when engaging Indians who are not self-alienated, complaisant and/or helpless "victims" (page 9): "The (IF) trustees (Sic) are so enthusiastic, in fact, that they are willing to give the time to review every piece of literature written about them and respond to it. They asked us to forward them any writing of ours that mentions them before it is to be seen by others, not to edit or alter our work, but to add and respond to it if they saw fit. The way IF explains this is that IF does not try to appropriate editorial rights over the work of others, but merely asks a chance to answer any criticisms or to correct any false claims presented therein. *While this makes working with IF frustrating,* (our emphasis) IF should not be seen as any less *scrupulous,* (authors emphasis) at least not in this aspect, than the academic community with which it seeks to communicate."

Considering the final comment above, this project is also providing IF with useful anthropological data about Western academe's mindset in its study of Indian culture, including the way many impressionable students looking for a decent grade are appropriated and used to reproduce neocolonial frameworks.

Finally, IF wishes to make the following recommendation for future projects of this kind:

1. Students must be required to have taken at least one course on Hinduism, so as to prevent them from using this to learn the basics of Hinduism. The professor must also give students an overview of the laws and practices of US tax-exempt organizations, including the different categories of such organizations, so that they understand the distinctions between the institution and the individuals who serve as trustees/advisors.
2. Publish a written set of "rules of the game" in advance, spelling out what rights and at what times the organizations will be able to review and comment on the materials being constructed about them. Clarify whether there are to be multiple versions of each paper, and if so, whether they would be shown a draft different than what gets published. Clarify whether the recordings of the public event at the end or at any other time, made by the professor and/or students, will also be made

- available to the participating organizations. Most of all, the professor must comply with all such agreements, and must not unilaterally change them on an ad hoc basis.
3. The peer status of the organizations and the scholars must be emphasized up front to the students, and reinforced periodically, to prevent their frustration of finding out that these are not classical “native informants.” Intellectual engagement by the organizations should be encouraged, rather than seen as a problem coming in the way, including disagreements over fundamental methodologies and prejudiced attitudes of the scholars.
  4. The professor must not badger those students who come back with a positive set of findings, and must not pressure them to “dig up some dirt” to sensationalize the portrayals. The professor must demand higher standards of data gathering, logical reasoning and interactions with the organizations being studied.
  5. The students’ own background and motives for interest in the research should be explained up front. This makes the interaction bi-directional and equitable.