“Translating Texts, Transmitting Tradition: Continuity and Change in Hindu Traditions”

Introduction to a Special Issue of the Journal of South Asian Intellectual History (SAIH)

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It is well known that religious practitioners have engaged heavily (though of course not exclusively) with written and oral texts across the history of South Asian religions. How, precisely, textual lives—the histories of texts in their production and use and their transformation or translation across linguistic, geographic, sectarian, and temporal spaces—have served to *define and shape* South Asian religious traditions and Hinduism¹ in particular, however, remains open to further investigation. The present, edited issue of the *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History* (SAIH) proffers to examine just this, the ways various linguistic registers and modes of textual transmission have been used to encode and articulate social, ideological, and soteriological identities across a diverse set of South Asian and particularly Hindu contexts.

In different but overlapping ways, the four essays here collected explore moments of rupture and continuity attending the strategic deployment of texts and language, with particular attention to how multilingual, heterogeneous, and polyvocal elements are resolved into synthetic or innovative paradigms.²

1 Fully aware of its etymology and complex history, we use this term as a short-handed reference to the myriad Śaiva, Śākta, Vaiṣṇava and other, often Veda-based but sometimes extra-Vedic traditions commonly denoted thereby. On the formation of “Hinduism,” see, e.g., Nicholson 2010.

2 These essays were first assembled in the form of a panel of presentations at the 2018 American Academy of Religion (AAR) National Meeting, the session in question also bearing the title

In thus asking how traditions develop and change and how texts facilitate this process, these essays zero in on the myriad intersections of text, language, and identity, engaging a range of Hindu traditions: a medieval Kashmiri Sanskrit work, a medieval South Indian, hybrid Sanskrit-Tamil text, a narrative of Hindu identity in early-modern and modern Nepal, and the transnational Vedantic articulations of Theosophy and Integral Yoga. With specific attention to linguistic shifts and coding of social and soteriological identities, these essays explore what it is that texts, in particular, did and can do to make, and remake, tradition: honing in on intertextual practices such as multilingual and functional translation, adaptation and Sanskritization, and translational-discursive techniques, the collected essays enquire as to how understandings of or ideas about tradition emerge both in the context of *and as a result of* such textual practices. The engagement of this collection with diverse historical, linguistic, and geographical material, we propose, thus opens a broader discussion regarding the implications of narrative and linguistic continuities and discontinuities for the religious and social categories that define Hinduism, and South Asian religions more generally, from the medieval period and into modernity.

Each of these essays implicitly and explicitly shares in the recognition that the strategies deployed in their translations and/or adaptations of particular materials, narratives, or texts belong not to the academic scholars who examine them, but to the religious agents themselves; it is the particular *choices* of the religious agents who make and transmit tradition, this is to say, that define the practices in question and render them significant. We further suggest that each essay in its own way tests a maxim that John Nemeć has stated elsewhere, namely, that *change is not inimical to religion, even if many religious agents are themselves inimical to change*.³ The simple point is that these essays draw one's attention squarely to the particular strategies that the authors of the works studied themselves wished to deploy. Change, where it appears, is intentionally

"Translating Texts, Transmitting Tradition: Continuity and Change in Hindu Traditions." It was offered as a joint session of the Hinduism Unit and the Religions in South Asia Unit of the AAR. The panel was initially proposed in preliminary form by John Nemeć and was developed and organized collaboratively by Nika Kuchuk and John Nemeć, with the four essayists as panel presenters and Nemeć as Respondent. Subsequent to the AAR National Meeting, Manasicha Akepiyapornchai approached Lawrence McCrea with the proposition of offering these essays as a special issue of *SAIH*. Nemeć drafted the proposal for the same, drawing liberally from the AAR panel proposal that was co-authored with Nika Kuchuk in doing so, and he offered editorial comments to the authors of each essay prior to final submissions for peer review. He and Nika Kuchuk subsequently prepared the present introductory essay collaboratively.

3 See Nemeć 2020.

made; and very often no loss of authority or authenticity results from it, but rather quite the opposite.

The essays are arranged chronologically. The first, by Tamara Cohen, examines the *Mokṣopāya* (MU), a medieval Kashmiri work, particularly its strategic re-narration of the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG). Recast there as the ‘Arjuna story’ or *Arjunopākhyāna* (AU), the MU retains various correspondences with the BhG both structurally and in terms of content: both the AU and the BhG are recounted as sub-narratives within a larger text and both address despondent princely heroes facing spiritual crisis, presenting a revelation about the true nature of reality. Yet, Cohen argues, the nonduality at the heart of Vasiṣṭha’s teaching in the AU is markedly different from the theology of the BhG. Suggesting that this retelling is in fact a “a polemic style semantic translation” that transforms “the discourse of the BhG into an entirely new conceptual language,” Cohen illustrates how “the AU alters the BhG as it is rendered from the dualistic *Sāṃkhya-Yoga* context of the MBh into the non-dualistic, idealist milieu of the MU.” No mere repetition of the source text, then, the AU elicits new philosophical meaning from a precedent narrative context. Cohen closely examines the role of translation in facilitating the same, drawing on the translation theory of Anton Popovič to complicate our understanding of the natures of ‘source text’ and ‘metatext’ (or target text) in doing so.

The second essay, by Manasicha Akepiyapornchai, takes the theme of a multi-vocal discourse and its implications for the soteriological and social aspects of narrative a step further, by turning to examine a multilingual text strategically composed in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Maṇipravāḷa, a hybrid language comprising both Sanskrit and Tamil. Paying particular attention to the mechanics of multilingual translation, Akepiyapornchai examines Vedāntadeśika’s (c. 1268–1369 CE) *Rahasyatrayasāra*—one of the most comprehensive of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas’ “Rahasya-granthas” or texts related to the interpretations of the traditional *mantras*—composed in Maṇipravāḷa and furnished with Sanskrit and Tamil opening and concluding verses. Significantly, Akepiyapornchai notes that the Sanskrit and Tamil verses included therein are not mutually re-iterative, but rather focus largely on different aspects of the tradition (philosophical and scriptural elements in the Sanskrit, community relationships in Tamil). And Akepiyapornchai argues that the *Rahasyatrayasāra* may be considered a translation insofar as it creates a single context accommodating both Sanskrit and Tamil streams of the tradition.

Especially germane is the insight that the coexistence in question of the three linguistic registers renders it impossible to designate either Tamil or Sanskrit as an “original” or source language. What is offered instead is a unique, polyglot framework, one that challenges Pollock’s simpler model of the “vernacular”

language(s) modeled on a “cosmopolitan” one. Rather, Akepiyapornchai argues, “both [Sanskrit and Tamil] are translated into Maṇipravāḷa, and only with all three of them together is the Śrīvaiṣṇavas’ imagination of a collective religious community possible.” The multi-linguality of the community the text serves, in the end, rendered the process of textual transmission linguistically more complex than the extant models have so far allowed.

The third essay, by Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz, examines the dynamics of textual formation as set within a broader context of the social history of a Himalayan community, focusing on the interplay between textual adaptation and identity-building, as well as the shifts that affect both as a result of societal and political changes. Here, Nepal’s popular *Svasthānīvratakathā* (svk) serves as a lens through which to examine the shift from the heterogeneity of Hindu identity in medieval Nepal toward a newly conceived, more politically driven Hindu homogeneity in early-modern and contemporary Nepal.

The svk originated as a Newari-language work in the late sixteenth century among Nepal’s indigenous Newar Hindus, it being in its original form a short legend celebrating the local goddess Svasthānī. Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the text and narrative were transformed into an expansive, Nepali-language work and rendered in form close to a normative Purāṇa grounded in Sanskritic literature. The new svk, finally codified in mass-produced and generously circulated print editions, indexed an increasingly dominant, pan-Hindu and high-caste, hill (Parbatiyā) ideology, practice, and identity, one that incorporated not only its foundational Śākta elements but also Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava narrative elements of pan-Indic provenance that were also indexed to local sites in the Kathmandu Valley. Examining the formation of the svk’s Purāṇicization as key moments of both rupture and continuity in local and regional articulations of Hindu identity, Birkenholtz thus traces the stages in a process that redefined the boundaries of local place and identity for Nepal’s Hindus.

Finally, the fourth essay, by Nika Kuchuk, examines the roles of translation in the invention of tradition in the transnational context of late-colonial (Neo) Vedantic movements, taking Theosophy’s Vedanta-inflected teachings as a particularly illustrative case. Kuchuk examines the ways in which translation, and more precisely the discourse of translation, served to frame both continuity and innovation in the writings of Helena Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society and its key proponent. The essay is striking for noting the degree to which Blavatsky’s choices sought to obscure any changes she might have introduced into the tradition she wished to document and define, all the more striking for the fact that among the items surveyed in this collection of

essays, it is the author historically closest to us who evidently was most inimical to (religious) change.

Of particular interest is Blavatsky's self-positioning as a translator, interpreter, and keeper of sacred, and secret, texts. Indeed, real irony lies with the fact that she buffered her claims of access to and interpretive insight into a universalist and transnational body of learning by appealing to the very particularist and historically attuned instruments of classical Indological scholarship, philology in particular. Kuchuk argues that the discursive technologies she engaged, regardless of the authenticity of their claims, allowed Blavatsky to locate Theosophical teachings both *within* Indic tradition(s) and, simultaneously, to advance a universalist program of intellectual-philosophical synthesis. Documenting Blavatsky's push of multivocality to its limit, then, this essay underscores the panel's core theme: language and texts in particular serve to make tradition and (religious) identity.

Taken together, then, these essays excavate various ways in which language and narrative have been engaged to encode religious identity and ideology, a discussion, we propose, that is particularly germane to the polyglot, multilingual context of Hinduism and Indic traditions more generally. These essays suggest that the religious agents who made and used texts in South Asia were deeply sophisticated in how they did so; it proffers, that is, that they knew *how* to make change and often did, translating and transmitting tradition in ways that were transformative. And while the present collection could hardly capture an exhaustive collection of possible studies, we hope it signals the degree to which the contours of cultural and intellectual history in and from South Asia are fundamentally determined by the innovations of those who made them.

Works Cited

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