



## OCHS' first Ph.D students graduate from Oxford University



*Dr Ravi Gupta graduates at the age of 22*

We are delighted to report that the Centre's first two Doctoral students graduated from Oxford University – Ravi Gupta and Kenneth Valpey. Ravi Gupta, just 22 years old and originally from Boise, Idaho, USA, completed his thesis on the "Vedanta Philosophy of Jiva Goswami." Having studied Sanskrit since the age of 12, Ravi had his sights set on pursuing an advanced degree in Sanskrit and Hindu studies. At 17, he graduated with a BA degree in Philosophy and a BS degree in Mathematics from Boise State University. Ravi had considered applying to Harvard, but decided against it because there was no infrastructure to support his practice as a Hindu while also being a student.

"The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies is a real community that supports both Hindu practice and study of the Hindu tradition. This combination especially works in Oxford because it has a long history of this."

After completing his M.St. in Religious Studies, with a focus on Hinduism and Christianity, he began his doctoral work in

2000. His decision to explore Jiva Goswami's works and impact was strategic.

"The Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition is well-studied by scholars, but the studies have almost all focused on the aesthetic, sociological, and cultural sides of the tradition. The amazing philosophical contributions have been almost completely ignored. I felt there was a gap in modern Hindu scholarship, and I wanted to help fill that gap."

For the future, Ravi aims for a teaching and research position at a university.

Kenneth Valpey also received his doctorate this year. His decision to study the worship of Lord Krishna was motivated by almost three decades as a pujari, or ritual priest. Kenneth completed his BA (honours) in Religious Studies at the University of California, followed by an MA in "The Cultural and Historical Study of Religion" at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley.

"Deity worship is something very prominent in Hindu temples. In the west, there is a tradition of condemning such things as the opposite to religious activity. So I thought it was something that could be dealt with in a careful, analytical way to help those in the west to learn what the Hindu tradition says, as well as to help Hindus articulate themselves in discussions on deity worship."

Kenneth has been offered a position of Post Doctoral Research Fellow at the OCHS. Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the Centre, wholeheartedly applauded their achievements here:

"We are extremely proud of Ravi and Kenneth. They are first-class ambassadors for the Centre. They are proof that careful study of Hinduism in a supportive environment will make a huge impact on people's perspectives on the Hindu tradition, and will positively influence their world-view."

By providing qualified tutors and academic supervisors to the University and by giving practitioners of Hinduism somewhere to study and live without compromising their practice, the Centre has successfully facilitated these two and many others' stays in Oxford.

**Editorial** Happy students, good facilities and excellent scholarship. That is what we aspire to at the OCHS, and with the help of our friends and benefactors we have been able to achieve these goals over the past seven years. The OCHS has developed into an important centre for Hindu Studies, offering tutoring and supervision for higher degrees in Oxford, accredited adult education courses in five cities in the UK, and nationally acclaimed research projects. We also run a Hindu Studies book series with RoutledgeCurzon.

But our real happiness came this year when our first students were granted their doctorates from Oxford University. We wish Dr Ravi Gupta and Dr Kenneth Valpey every success in their scholarly careers in Hindu Studies. At the same time we have gained three new students, all coming from the USA to be part of Oxford University and the OCHS.

With the advent of the next academic year the Centre will welcome its new Academic Director, Prof. Gavin Flood. Prof. Flood is one of the UK's senior scholars in the field of Hindu studies, with a long list of publications deepening our understanding of South Asian religions. Prof. Francis X. Clooney SJ, the OCHS Academic Director from 2001-2004, has now returned to the USA where he was recently elected to a professorship at Harvard University. Our 2004-2005 Academic Director, Prof. Pratap Kumar, will be returning to South Africa at the end of this academic year, taking our good wishes with him. We owe both Frank and Pratap a great debt for all they did to develop and nurture the Centre, its ethos, values, scholars and students.

This year we lost two members of our Academic Advisory Council, Prof. Friedhelm Hardy and Dr Julia Leslie. They were both very well-respected scholars and good friends of the Centre. We offer all our sympathy to their families.

We have added Birmingham and Cambridge to the venues for our Hindu Studies Course. Our students, who come from every age group and background, greatly appreciate being able to study Hinduism in a scholarly way. We plan to expand the programme to the north of the country next year.

Shaunaka Rishi Das

# OCHS New Academic Director: Professor Gavin Flood

Following in the footsteps of senior scholars like Prof. Frank Clooney (Harvard University, USA) and Prof. Pratap Kumar (KwaZulu Natal, South Africa), from October 2005 the new Academic Director of OCHS will be Prof. Gavin Flood, who is currently the senior lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Stirling, Scotland. With research interests that span South Asian traditions, Prof. Flood's history of research and publication is outstanding. His publications include *An Introduction to Hinduism*, *Body and Cosmology in Kashmir Saivism*, and *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*. He is also the editor of *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*.

Prof. Flood is now taking time away from his position in Scotland to lead OCHS: tutoring students interested in learning

about Hinduism, lecturing on the world-wide significance of South Asian cultures, and directing OCHS' academic activities over the next three years. Prof. Flood explained: "I have always had a general interest in Hinduism, even as a boy when I remember reading an article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that was utterly compelling and utterly incomprehensible for me at the time!"

Hindu studies, he says, should be devoted to "the deepening of knowledge about Hindu traditions, the development of reflection on the arts and literature (particularly in the vernacular) of Indian culture, and the development of Hindu theological reasoning from within those traditions, in ways that meet modern criteria of rigour. We might add that the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies has



Prof. Gavin Flood

a further pedagogical responsibility to disseminate information and knowledge about Hindu traditions to both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'."

Prof. Flood will be an extremely welcome addition to our existing scholars and students, overseeing OCHS' development as an international centre of research and publication on Hindu culture, ancient and modern.

## OCHS Hindu Studies Continuing Education Department



Over the last twelve months the work of our Continuing Education Department has again focused on offering the Certificate in Hindu Studies at new locations across the country. Classes have continued in Harrow, Ilford and Leicester, and in January 2005 the course started in a new venue in Birmingham. At present we have over eighty students registered on the Certificate Course, engaged in university level study of Hindu traditions and culture. Their studies are accredited by the University of Wales, Lampeter, and for many students the rewards are both intellectual and personal. To date, students have explored issues of Hindu identity; the Vedas and Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, and Puranas; Bhakti, Advaita, Samkhya and Yoga; and the ethics and lifestyles encompassed by the Hindu tradition.

Since its inception in September

2003, the programme has met with remarkable success. The number of students maintaining their studies is much higher than the national average for Adult Education, and our courses have met with an overwhelmingly favourable response from the student body.

*British Hinduism is in a state of rapid change and it is vital that the community finds ways of understanding its own ideals so that they can be effectively passed on to a new generation.*

The Continuing Education Department is a non-profit project that is seen by the Centre as fulfilling a vital role in its mission of promoting a broader understanding of Hindu scholarship. Hinduism in Britain is now facing new challenges in terms of preserving its views, values and its unique identity. For it to successfully meet these challenges a wider understanding of belief, practice and tradition is essential within the community.

According to Dr Nicholas Sutton, the department's Director, "British Hinduism is in a state of rapid change and it is vital that the community finds ways of understanding

its own ideals so that they can be effectively passed on to a new generation. Young British Hindus ask searching questions and it is important that as many people as possible are able to provide effective answers to the questions they ask. I have been delighted and inspired by the response to this course from within the community and I really believe that we are providing a very important service."

The study modules offered are all based on the highest standard of academic research but at the same time participants are constantly invited to reflect on the real significance of the topics considered, both in a general sense and in their own lives. Dr Sutton concludes, "Writing and researching this course has probably been the most demanding academic work that I have ever undertaken, but at the same time it is immensely rewarding. I never cease to be impressed by the dedication that our students bring to their studies." It is anticipated that in the next year the Continuing Education Department will offer further study modules leading to a university diploma or possibly even a BA Honours Degree in Hindu Studies. This would be a major step forward, and we continue to be the only academic institution in the country offering even a Certificate level course exclusively in the study of Hinduism.

## High Commissioner of India, Mr Kamlesh Sharma visits OCHS



*Mr Kamlesh Sharma, centre, and OCHS students*

We recently had the great pleasure of entertaining the High Commissioner of India, Mr Kamlesh Sharma, accompanied by his wife Mrs Babli Sharma and Special Assistant Mrs Kulkarna, for lunch in Oxford on our OCHS premises. On 17 February, scholars, students, staff and the Oxford Hindu Student Society gathered to meet the High Commissioner, who took the time to discuss Hindu Studies with those present. Prof. Richard Gombrich, Boden Professor of Sanskrit in Oxford for almost 30 years, presented the latest translation of a major Sanskrit text to the High Commissioner as a token of our shared commitment to the unique treasures of Indian culture. The gift was received with thanks and the High Commissioner recognised that there is a pressing need to make the ancient heritage more accessible to modern Indians at large.

Over lunch the High Commissioner chatted with the Chairs of the Theology and Oriental Studies Faculty Boards about

exploring ways of attracting more Indian Students to Oxford. The High Commissioner noted that there was a need for intensified exchanges with Oxford both at the levels of students and faculty, and all means should be explored towards this end. He also said that subjects such as the study of modern Indian languages in Oxford should be strengthened, in addition to the technological fields.

Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of OCHS, agreed: "If we can use Oxford as a model to develop a first class South Asian Studies programme it will be of great benefit internationally, and it will greatly help in developing understanding of India in the global context."

When the last cup of tea had been drunk and the last word said, the High Commissioner left with the OCHS Director to make a very particular pilgrimage: to the grave of Prof. Max Muller, one of the West's first great Sanskritists.

## OCHS Friends Programme



*Lord Dholakia of OCHS Patrons Council*

This year the Centre has launched its 'Friends' programme. It is an invitation, by Lord Dholakia of our Patrons Council, for the public to join our 'Friends of the OCHS' campaign. The Centre has achieved great academic success. But to ensure that the OCHS achieves its full potential we need the generous support of private and corporate sponsorship.

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This is a great opportunity for those who are passionate about the education of young people, and the preservation and promotion of the culture. Together we can help define and develop the subject of Hindu Studies. We can inspire and enthuse young scholars to become the thinkers, spokespersons and planners for future generations of Hindus in this country. Our work opens up dialogues for greater understanding and respectful relationships.

## New BA students at OCHS



Claire Robinson, left, and Ashiyana Nariani

Ashiyana Nariani is a visiting student from the USA, now based at OCHS and Wadham College as one of our first two Bachelors Degree students. Her studies combine Hindu Studies, Hindi and Mathematics, and she will be studying these subjects here for the rest of the academic year.

"I am enjoying this experience so much, and I'm grateful to OCHS for taking me under its wing. I chose to study Hinduism for many reasons, but the basis of my interest was sparked by the teachings of Dada J. P. Vaswani – I realised that Hindu youth in the midst of the Indian diaspora, myself included, are not educated in their own Hindu traditions and in many cases have very little scope for understanding what Hinduism is from a larger perspective. Under the guidance of OCHS I am vastly increasing my knowledge of Hinduism."

Claire Robison already has a Ministerial Certificate from the Bhaktivedanta College in Belgium, 2003, and this year she is based at OCHS and Mansfield College to gain a BA degree in Theology from Oxford University.

"My academic interests are in the study and interpretation of Hindu religious texts and the traditions founded upon them. I find that I like the independent responsibility that the Oxford system gives you. The OCHS was a major factor in my decision to come here. It has been helpful and encouraging to be part of a place that welcomes people who bring a religious commitment to their academic study of Hinduism. The resources and the encouragement that OCHS provides – it has been very valuable to have that."

Claire and Ashiyana seem to have settled happily into Oxford's way of life and learning, and OCHS is very pleased to have them on board.

## Indian Institute of Technology visit to OCHS



On a lovely mid-summer's day last August, the London Chapter of the Indian Institute of Technology organised a trip of association members, their families and friends to OCHS. After a tour of the Centre and a satisfying lunch the group walked to Worcester College, where Dr Ranjit Sondhi CBE, a member of the governing board of

BBC and the OCHS Patrons Council gave a thought provoking and entertaining talk on issues facing Asian Britons. This was followed by a lively discussion.

The Centre hosts groups of visitors regularly, from youth groups and businessmen to Swamis and temple communities.

## Senior Indian scholars visit OCHS

The Centre has been fortunate to host two distinguished scholars this academic year. In autumn 2004, Vasudha Narayanan, Professor of Religion at the University of Florida and past president of the American Academy of Religion, came to the OCHS as the Tamil Krishna Goswami Visiting Fellow. She delivered the Wahlstrom Lecture, providing insight into the breadth of Hindu cultural expansion beyond the borders of modern India, with examples from Angkor Wat and other Cambodian sacred sites.

This spring, we welcomed Ashok Aklujkar, Professor of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia, as our

new Shivdasani Visiting Fellow. Educated at Poona and Harvard Universities, Prof. Aklujkar's research has focused on Indian philosophy, language and literature. Here at OCHS he has been speaking on a wide range of topics, from the ancient connections between yoga and language, to the possibilities of creating new literature in Sanskrit.

OCHS will also be visited in May and June by Dr Nilima Chitgopekar of Delhi University, and Dr David Washbrook of St Anthony's College, Oxford, who will be giving the distinguished Majewski lecture.



OXFORD CENTRE  
FOR HINDU STUDIES

*Please feel free to contact us with your thoughts, suggestions and support. Let's work together to invest in a bright future for Hindu traditions.*

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