Hindu Theology and the Question of Qualification: A Study of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

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In August 2011 I took a short trip to Nabadvip with a friend of mine to escape the steamy concrete jungle of Kolkata, where I was collecting manuscripts for my research. While in Nabadvip we visited several Vaiṣṇava temples, including one belonging to the Śrī Caitanya Sarasvat Maṭh, a modern branch of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Among others I was introduced to a young American convert who had recently become a saṃnyāsin. While he was competent in Bengali and had translated Bengali works of his guru into English, he was not very familiar with Sanskrit and asked me some questions about Sanskrit grammar, which I was able to clarify. Feelings of mutual respect arose, and we continued a lively discussion, academic and otherwise.¹

The pleasant mood suddenly changed, however, when I told him that the text I was currently working on was the Ujjvalanīlamaṇi of sixteenth-century Rūpa Gosvāmī. Written by one of the founding fathers of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, this work is a systematic treatise on the aesthetic sentiments of Kṛṣṇa and his female companions. Upon hearing this he stopped talking and stared at me with disbelief. After a few moments of awkward silence, he said he must stop this conversation since Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (1874–1937),² a twentieth-century Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava reformer and the founder of his Maṭh, forbade study of the text, and I was going against that order. Saddened by this turn of events, I left the temple compound reflecting on how to respond to what had just happened.

The issue at hand was that of qualification (adhikāra) or the eligibility³

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to study a certain genre of texts. Practitioners of the tradition consider texts such as the *Ujjvalanīlamāṇi* to contain highly esoteric knowledge that is suitable only for advanced practitioners. This paper discusses the question of qualification in the study of Hindu theological texts, which, as Anantanand Rambachan points out (2006: 3), has been scarcely addressed in the discussion of Hindu theology.

In the following I first elaborate on the nature of esoteric texts in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and demonstrate how we can have meaningful engagements with those texts for academic purposes. Then, in the second section, I briefly review the current discussion on Hindu theology as a normative category within the study of South Asian intellectual traditions. In this section I point out the lack of discussion on the topic of qualification. In the third section I elaborate on the topic of qualification in South Asian traditions broadly, and particularly in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Then in the fourth section I propose the ways in which we may be able to approach Hindu theological texts without dealing with the question of qualification. My intention is to create a space for an outsider to approach Hindu theology in the academic context while acknowledging and respecting the boundaries set by the practitioners of various traditions.

**Approaching Esoteric Texts: A Case Study**

The kind of encounter I described in the introduction is not unique. Donna M. Wulff describes a similar experience during her doctoral research on Rūpa Gosvāmī’s drama titled *Vidagdhamādhava*:

Rūpa’s poetic and dramatic works are not primers for beginning students, but highly elaborate literary productions presupposing vast knowledge of such earlier devotional texts as the *Bhāgavata* as well as of the subtle intricacies of Sanskrit poetics. Nor is it novices who read these works; Rūpa’s dramas are considered suitable only for advanced devotees. Indeed, this conception of *adhikāritva* or “eligibility” to read such texts proved to be an obstacle in my effort to discuss Rūpa’s dramas with devotees in Bengal: how was it that I—not only a non-Vaiṣṇava, but a foreigner and a mere neophyte in the study of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava literature—was reading these highly esoteric works? One monk, who showed me around the library of the Sri Chaitanya Research Institute