

*Bhaktivedanta College for Religious Science
Report of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee*



*ACCREDITATION REPORT
(Intermediary evaluation)*

BHAKTIVEDANTA COLLEGE FOR RELIGIOUS SCIENCE

30. June, 2006

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BHAKTIVEDANTA COLLEGE FOR RELIGIOUS SCIENCE	Measure given Y
EVALUATION OF VAISNAVA THEOLOGY PROGRAMME <u>Name of the subject:</u> Vaisnava theology; <u>Level of training:</u> college <u>Form and period of training:</u> Daytime and corresponding forms, eight semesters. <u>Qualification requirements -</u> <u>Classification:</u> Theology <u>Name of the Subject in the Bologna System:</u> Lecture on Vaisnava Religion <u>Field of Study:</u> Theology	Measure given Y

REASONS FOR THE MEASURE AND EVALUATION:

1.) Background information

The reasons given should be based on the report of the first Accreditation of the College. HAC resolution No. 2003/7/VI/1/5. concerns Vaisnava Theology programme and says:

In the following period (up to 30th June 2006) the College should

- improve the infrastructural conditions of teaching;
- improve the library in accordance with the subjects taught on the courses of the College;
- improve the international relationship of the College, especially with Indian universities.

Resolution No. 2003/7/VI/1/6. Concerns Bhaktivedanta College for Religious Science as an institution and says that the College should carry out the same improvements on college level that were formulated on programme level.

2.) Evaluation of Vaisnava Theology programme

Concerning the purpose of the program, the Director confirmed that the objectives of the present and proposed new "Bologna" BA program are as follows:

- to train ministers and instructors for ISKCON;
- to qualify persons for temple service and administration;
- to educate "lay" people who are simply interested in Indian culture.

According to the plenary session the present B.A. curriculum is too ambitious, especially in its claim to reliably and authoritatively convey the most important aspects of the cultural background of the ISKCON religious tradition, namely, the vast, highly complex and historically much differentiated intellectual culture of traditional South Asia (India). The curriculum includes much more than the specific Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology as it was developed within and for ISKCON by its leading figures in the wake of Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977) who based himself by way of his personal lineage on the teachings of early modern Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologians. Actually, a large part of the curriculum (Part 4; 528 hours, 86 credits, 25,1%) concerns "Arts and Sciences", i.e., some of the traditional fields of knowledge in ancient and medieval India as well as other topics which are introduced as "sciences". As becomes apparent from the course descriptions, these areas of traditional knowledge and other topics are being presented very much from the point of view of ISKCON and its many popular publications on Indian culture by non-specialists, without sufficient consideration of the extensive scholarly, i.e., academic literature available on the various subjects, published in India as well as in the Western world in accessible languages and based on critical scholarly research. Also Part 1 ("The Sources of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and the Means of Study"; 612 hours, 68 credits, 29.1%) contains mostly Indological courses in the proper sense of the term, and Part 2 ("The Scientific Approach to the Teachings of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism"; 720 hours, 84 credits, 34,3%) equally relies on this background.

This neglect of academic sources leads in some cases to a distorted picture of traditional Indian culture. We would like to mention a very basic issue first, namely, the specific ISKCON usage of the

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term "Vedic" which is well known and has been questioned many times before from different sides. Considering the wide variety of traditional ideas about the Veda(s) and consequently about what is Vedic, such a specific usage is perfectly legitimate. However, in the context of an academic curriculum, even if it is culminating in a theological degree, and not a degree in the arts or humanities, it should be made clear that the ISKCON use of term "Vedic" is quite different from other usages in India itself and from its academic usage by Indian and Western scholars. It would even be appropriate to offer a special course on this very topic to make the students aware of its complexity and multi-valence, and to avoid a mixing-up of conceptionally and historically widely different subjects.

Furthermore, and similarly, though with reference of academic sources in general, the frequent usage of the words "science" and "scientific" indicates an insufficient academic approach and should be more precisely defined and reflected upon in an academic context as aspired by the College. This concerns not only Part 4, but also Part 2 of the curriculum ("Scientific Approach to the Teachings of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism"). Again, the specific usage of these terms by influential ISKCON thinkers who are normally writing and thinking in an English speaking world is well known. Nevertheless, there should be some academically informed, historically sensitive discussion on the issue of what may be meant by "science" in the Western intellectual tradition and some reflection on it within the genuine Indian cultural background which ISKCON claims for itself, i.e., some exploration of possible terms and concepts relating to the semantic and connotational field of "science" in the traditional Sanskrit and in vernacular writings of interest or authoritative standing for ISKCON theologians. Even within the context of a theological curriculum, there should be scope for the differentiation between "scientific" and "scholastic" or "exegetical". E.g., "science of God" is by no means "scientific" in the modern sense of the word, even though one may certainly turn back to other historical usage of it. Once the usage has been put into this perspective, it can become a legitimate theological tool.

The insufficient or lacking reference to Indological literature specifically, together with the just described deficiency, further results in misrepresentations of traditional Indian fields of knowledge ("Sciences"). For instance, pedagogy has never been viewed as a field of knowledge in India, neither in the Vedic cultural period nor subsequently in classical and medieval times; there was no Vedic and later theory of communication as a separate field of knowledge, because theories of communication were part of the epistemologies of the various philosophical traditions, and the issue as such cannot simply be equated with logic (and even less with the philosophical tradition called Nyāya which was especially interested in developing logic); the vast and heterogeneous field of knowledge called Dharmaśāstra treats with socio-religious norms in the most general sense and encompasses inter alia the knowledge of rituals, religious duties, normative concepts of society and behavior in society as well as law (criminal, civil, procedural), propounded and discussed in a large number of diverging Sanskrit works composed over a historical period of almost two thousand years – thus, it is highly misleading to speak of "sociology" in this context, of a single type of society labeled Vedic, or of a single, monolithic Vedic legal "system"; there was political science in ancient and medieval India after the Vedic period properly speaking, but it has nothing to do with the traditional field of Dhanurveda (knowledge about weapons); etc. It is symptomatic that scholarly literature, if recommended, is often outdated and not reliable any longer, may be even misleading, or does not seem suitable at all for a course on the B.A. level; the bulk of the literature used is second or even third hand, very frequently compiled by non-specialists and non-scholars in the respective field.

To sum up, if a claim is made to convey academic and authoritative, reliable knowledge about India's traditional culture, and this is done in the context of the B.A. program (academic nature) and very prominently in the context of the ambitious Bhaktivedanta Cultural and Educational Institute Project (authoritative and reliable nature), the results and ongoing researches of academic Indology cannot be ignored. There should be a clear distinction between what is known about Indian culture from this indispensable point of view on the one hand and the specific ISKCON perspective at the center of the program which relates to and interprets Indian culture in its own, peculiar way and within the larger context of its own objectives on the other hand. This requirement applies not only to the large general component of the B.A. program and general educational program on India, but also to the specific theological component. Here, too, more reference should be made to the academic sources on the

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diverse Vaiṣṇava religious tradition as such, on its history and the history of its ideas, and on its literature, next to the ISKCON-internal source materials, of course, which present their legitimate own denominational view and interpretation, which has itself already become traditional in the modern period.

Finally, even though the basic grammar of Sanskrit is laudably part of the program, it does not appear that within the B.A. program at least a few courses are devoted to the study of the original sources in their own language. Even though the bulk of ISKCON literature is written in English, including extensively annotated translations or renderings of the original authoritative and otherwise relevant works written in Sanskrit, it would be expected from a Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologian with a B.A. degree to be able to basically deal with some of the most important Sanskrit works in Sanskrit, just as from a Christian or Jewish theologian one would expect such a basic level of competence in the Greek, Latin or ancient Hebrew sources of their religion, in order to have direct access to them and not be exclusively confined to the source materials in their own modern language; in addition, in the case of most of the literature used in the program, there is even a remoteness of one more stage on account of the translation of the English translations into Hungarian.

Following a requirement formulated by the earlier HAC resolution, the curriculum has been enriched with some reference to other religious traditions and with selected source materials on the individual topics that broaden the perspective to include their non-Indian counterparts and thus to place the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava view into a larger context.

Graduates of the College have the opportunity of pursuing M.A. studies in Vaiṣṇava Theology at institutions of the same kind in Europe and in the United States; following the earlier HAC resolution's requirement, international relations have been established with two Indian universities (Sardar Patel University, Gujarat; Somaiya University, Mumbai [private]) where the B.A. degree earned at the College will be honored towards M.A. studies. The College also aims at establishing an M.A. program which they plan to build in collaboration with The Gate of Dharma Buddhist College. Towards the end of continuing M.A. studies in Religious Studies they would like to gain support from scholars of religion at other Hungarian universities; negotiations are ongoing, however, not with major accredited institutions.

The teaching infrastructure is suitable for the present size of the student body; the teaching rooms offer enough space, are suitably furnished and give enough light. One part of the library contains Indological books relevant to some of the subjects taught, mainly translations from the Sanskrit into English and English-language studies, including traditional and recent standard works. However, different from the much larger, professionally managed Hungarian-language section, the books do not seem to have received call numbers. In comparison with the larger Hungarian section of the library, there is still much scope for growth and new acquisitions. In view of the other good academic libraries in Budapest, though, and the increasing availability of sources on the internet, this is not a crucial point.

Requirements formulated by HAC plenary session

- increased consideration of academic Indological research and research in related areas in the curriculum
- differentiation between academic and denominational perspectives
- some critical evaluation and historical positioning of the own tradition
- increased student engagement with the original sources

3.) Evaluation of the College as an institution

A. Teaching

The VC attended three classes on May 4th.

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10:00 - 11:30 First year class on Bhagavad Gītā

Lecturer: István Tasi

The lecture was held in so-called frontal lecture style; it appeared fluent, lively and well-prepared. As for its genre, it had the nature of an exegesis following Bhaktivedanta's commentary on the Gītā; in general, it was systematic and analytical. The lecturer employed some historical comparisons and made reference to other works, like the Bhāgavata. He also spoke about multiple meanings and hidden interpretation. The lecture was didactically appropriate and well-structured, although there was little active student involvement and student-teacher interaction. The lecturer did not seem to have access to the original Sanskrit text in order to directly remark on it.

14:15 - 15:45 First year class on Sanskrit

Lecturer: Rita Jeney

The lecturer followed the traditional way of teaching and practicing Sanskrit grammar, i.e., the analytical and theoretical style of teaching a classical language. The lecture was delivered with precision and systematic. In addition, the lecturer presented examples from the Bhagavad Gītā and gave word-by-word explanations. She was well-prepared and had designed useful charts. There was lively interaction and strong involvement of students.

14:15 - 15:45 Second year class on Śrīmad Bhāgavatam

Lecturer: Péter Németh

The class was presented as a seminar in the style of an exegetical sermon. The lecturer commented upon the translated text by using modern examples. His explanations seemed rather one-dimensional, leaving no room for differing approaches. Although being guided in this way, the students were very active. They were apparently highly motivated and devoted to their study.

The VC met with two groups of students: first-year students and as small group of more advanced students. When interviewed about their motivation to study at the College, it became obvious that the majority of students were devoted adherents of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. In the opinion of the beginners' group, their study advances their knowledge and strengthens their faith. They also emphasized the ethical values and spiritual benefits which are involved in their study. They preferred and praised the more personal guidance by the teachers and generally personal atmosphere which they think is lacking at the larger public universities; they stressed the seriousness of their teachers and the fact that they are practicing what they are teaching. At the same time they felt that various viewpoints are admitted and the views of other religions considered. Those without affiliation with ISKCON mentioned that they are not expected to join the religion or put under pressure to do so. Concerning the courses, they considered them well built-up and the course materials manageable; the importance of Sanskrit was clearly realized by them in view of the large amount of lexical knowledge and technical terms conveyed to them. The advanced students appreciated the systematic nature of the curriculum and the intermingling of study and practice; there was also some interest in working with the original Sanskrit sources. One of them expressed as his aim after receiving the B.A. degree work as a theology teacher, research in theology and involvement in the organizational and other tasks of the College, whereas another mentioned the further deepening of faith and knowledge as the only aim of continuing the study, without any further plans after completing the thesis, and still another continuing with M.A. studies at an Indian university. All had concrete plans about their theses based on English-language sources. When asked about the phenomenon of drop-outs, they ascribed this to the high demands and hard work required, changing personal and work situations, and the difficulty of following the curriculum next to a regular life.

HAC would like to make the following critical remarks on teaching in the College in general:

Even within the framework of theology, academic teaching in higher, tertiary education should aim at developing independent and critical thinking in students and encourage question-raising and intellectual involvement. After having examined some of the theses submitted to the College we established that they were mainly compilations and reproductions of existing materials, and that they thus demonstrated little critical and independent involvement with the subject matter, as one would expect from an academic thesis, even in the area of theology. It is, therefore, suggested that more attention will be paid to the intellectual growth of the students.

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Teaching staff

As already critically remarked by the 2003 HAC resolution, in general, the teaching staff does not have the academic qualification necessary to teach the many diverse subjects concerning Indian culture which are included in the curriculum and would require the basic qualification of specialized Indologists; only three among them have some basic knowledge of Sanskrit (cf. below). Next to receiving the relevant data on the teaching staff, the VC met with eight faculty members, permanently and temporarily employed, including the Director. Most of them have earned lower degrees (B.A. or M.A.) in unrelated areas. In some cases, they are in the process of acquiring a Ph.D. in a discipline, such as law, from which perspective they attempt to relate to the corresponding field of knowledge in ancient India, or are planning similarly oriented Ph.D. studies, such as in sociology, with the aim to deepen and inform their knowledge of Indian society. It remains open if this will substantially increase their qualification as academic teachers of the specific aspects of Indian culture.

Among the more qualified teaching staff, one has to mention Gábor Sonkoly, a part-time assistant professor who holds a Ph.D. in History, although not in the field of South Asian, and will continue his advanced research (academic doctorate) on a topic in the social and cultural history of India, expected to be concluded in about two years from now. His qualification would then allow him to supervise M.A. students. Even though he does not have access to original sources, continued original academic research as well as the academic historical methodology employed will further enhance his qualification and will be of great relevance to the academic standards of the College. László Tóth-Soma, on the other hand, a fully and permanently employed assistant professor, although a graduate in the Natural Sciences, has received his Ph.D. in philosophy from a well-known university in Kolkata, India, where he conducted studies with his supervisor for some five years. They were concluded with a thesis on Vaiṣṇavism, albeit unfortunately without utilization of original sources, although the relevant study courses would have been available at Rabindra Bharati University. Even so he is thus Indologically more distinguished than his colleagues. Although she wrote her Ph.D. thesis in the field of literature, Krisztina Danka, also a permanent full-time assistant professor, devoted her thesis work to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava religious literature and seems to be familiar with the relevant English-language academic secondary literature in this field. Dr. Veronika Farkas, a medical doctor and general practitioner, teaches a course on Āyurveda, i.e., traditional Indian medicine; her professional qualification gives her special access to the secondary literature which forms the basis of her course as a guest lecturer employed by way of individual contracts. Among the teaching staff, Rita Jeney, a part-time employed assistant lecturer with an M.A. in archaeology and related studies concerning South Asia, definitely stands out as a student of Indology on her way to an M.A. in this most relevant field, to be completed in March 2007 at ELTE. Her work on the Sanskrit grammar of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Jīvagosvāmin, together with his own commentary and two further commentaries, is conducted on the basis of hitherto unexplored Sanskrit works. Another permanently full-time assistant professor who is a Ph.D. aspirant in Indology at Paris, Orsolya Németh, was not available for the interview; she has acquired a diploma in Sanskrit proficiency at A Tan Kapuja Buddhist College. Gábor Tóth, who is a permanently employed lecturer, equally has obtained this diploma, but does not seem to have any further university level training in Indian or South Asian Studies to supplement this basic language course with textual readings and interpretation.

Although no sabbaticals are provided to the teachers, the Director asserted that continuing education in pedagogy and the various areas of knowledge is being provided to them by the college. One staff member, with a B.A. degree in Vaiṣṇava theology granted by the College, has also attended special teacher training courses at two levels at an ISKCON-related institution in Belgium. The College is furthermore very active in organizing yearly conference on different topics to which academics and theologians of other religions are also invited; in 2006 such a conference will take place in cooperation with ELTE. In the context of the Socrates/Erasmus programs, conferences on sacred space were organized. There is also some cooperation with the Collegium Budapest.

Requirements formulated by HAC to be fulfilled within a period of four years

In view of the large component of Indological subjects in the curriculum, mainly in Part 4, but also concerning practically all courses of Part 1, some courses of Part 2 and the historical and cultural

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background for some components of courses of Part 2, a strong effort should be made to raise the academic standing in Indian or South Asian Studies (Indology) of the faculty, especially of permanently employed teaching staff. This could be effected by encouraging at least B.A. studies in this area, preferably M.A. studies, at accredited institutions. A B.A. degree in the area would guarantee an academically better informed and more reliable, historically reflected view on the many aspects of Indian culture taught per se at the College or as forming the general cultural background or context of the specific Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava topics in theology. As the acquisition of a more than just basic knowledge of Sanskrit, the most relevant language for Indian Studies in general, would be a component of any serious B.A. course in Indology, a first-hand and therefore more immediate, at the same time also intellectually critical access to most of the authoritative Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava literature would be furthered by such a measure. It would change the nature of most of the present curriculum from the mere repetition and dogmatic explanation of what is presented in originally English-language secondary literature of ISKCON in the area of Indian culture and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theology to a multi-faceted, intellectually challenging and indeed well-designed academic introduction into this wide area for future Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologians (and possibly others who are just interested in Indian culture and a modern expression of its religious traditions), who may be stimulated to continue with M.A. studies to further delve into their own tradition mainly on the basis of its underlying original sources and considerably expand and differentiate their view of the tradition.

To sum up the requirements:

- B.A. degrees, preferably M.A. degrees, in Indian or South Asian Studies (Indology) for permanent teaching staff
- acquisition of intermediate, preferably advanced competence in Sanskrit for the majority of lecturers

B. Infrastructure

The present infrastructure of the College is overall satisfactory and will be further improved, especially as regards staff offices and IT facilities, once the College will move to the premises of the planned Bhaktivedanta Cultural and Educational Institute.

C. Research

The teaching staff members who have been pointed out above under A. as mostly qualified from the academic point of view, i.e., Orsolya Németh, László Tóth-Soma and Krisztina Danka, have produced a number of survey works, introductions, compilations and text books for the College as well as some original contributions (books and articles), albeit without access to the original sources, on topics of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and, to a lesser degree, the Hindu religious tradition as such, as well as some translations, presumably from English translations of Sanskrit sources. With some exceptions, e.g., the Ph.D. thesis of Krisztina Danka, they have been published in ISKCON organs or by non-academic publishing houses connected with ISKCON or popularizing Asian religions in the West, not in Hungarian or international academic places of publication. However, considering the predominantly theological nature of the research this confinement is natural and understandable. Orsolya Németh's Indological thesis work conducted at Paris (EHESS) remains unpublished or is in process; Gábor Sonkoly's research on the social history of space in South Asia and Rita Jeney's M.A. thesis work are in an incipient respectively advanced stage.

D. Management of college

The present management, which includes not only teaching agenda, but also the organization of conferences and workshops, the publication of text books, other books and a journal, is extremely well organized and very efficient thanks to the great devotion of the administrative officers and their

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staff. It is to be expected that this situation will not change even after the establishment of the larger Institute and the expansion of agendas.

REMARKS AND SUGGESTIONS OF HAC CONCERNING THE BHAKTIVEDANTA COLLEGE FOR RELIGIOUS SCIENCE

1. How to prepare the College for the next accreditation evaluation?

To fulfil the requirements formulated by the VC of 2006 as regards the present curriculum when designing the new Bologna-type B.A. course and to strive for the required improvement of the academic qualification of the teaching staff in the relevant area.

2. Anything HAC would like to call to the attention of the would-be VC?

To carefully examine in detail whether the requirements formulated by the 2006 VC have been implemented in the revised B.A. Bologna-conformable curriculum.

***Y = ACCEPTABLE / N = NOT ACCEPTABLE**