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Tribute: Tamal Goswami

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TRIBUTE

Tamal Goswami 1947 - 2002

FROM a mundane perspective, the death of Tamal Krishna Goswami (Thomas G. Herzig) on March 15th was a tremendous loss: to his religious community, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and to the world of scholarship in the academic study of religion. Goswami, as he wished to be called, both in the Divinity Faculty and in his College, Clare Hall, in the University of Cambridge, was my doctoral student. In the UK, there is generally no panel of doctoral advisers, as in North America. There is a single supervisor who bears sole responsibility for the candidate's academic progress. As can be imagined, potentially this makes for a close academic relationship between supervisor and candidate. So it was with Goswami and myself. Goswami was coming to the end of three years' research, and I had the opportunity to know him well.

The prospect of supervising Tamal Krishna Goswami was first raised with me in April 1997. Professor Lonnie D Kliever, the-then Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, wrote to me, commending Goswami as a prospective candidate. I had met Professor Kliever at SMU several years earlier, and respected him as a person and a scholar. Goswami had also come recommended by Professor Kenneth Cracknell, formerly of Cambridge, England, but now teaching and residing at Dallas. Kenneth was also someone I looked up to as a friend and scholar. So I decided to give careful consideration to Goswami's case. Goswami was a renouncer-monk of a religious Order, approaching middle age. If Cambridge and I were to consider him seriously, he would have to give evidence of having gone through several academic

hoops of training in the academic study of religion and other criteria of competence. I was impressed to learn that even at his age he was resolute and mentally flexible enough to be succeeding in the appropriate undergraduate course at SMU. Things looked possible. But Cambridge imposed reasonable conditions: a good degree and competence in Sanskrit. In the event, Goswami gave evidence of meeting both requirements. This was accompanied by excellent references.

In the half millennium history of the Divinity Faculty at the University of Cambridge, no student of Goswami's background had been accepted before. There were understandable doubts about his preparedness for a senior research degree. As a renouncer-monk with pastoral and teaching responsibilities in an organization with no track record at the time of successful doctoral candidates in the academy, would he be able to do what was needed? These were legitimate questions. But I considered the evidence and had a personal interview with Goswami. I decided to take him on, and the Faculty's Degree Committee, after inspecting the evidence themselves, decided to back my recommendation. Neither I nor the Faculty ever had reason to regret our decision. Goswami seemed naturally to slip into the academic groove. Accustomed himself to giving guidance from a position of authority, he had the ability to place himself with the right attitude at the receiving end educationally. He accepted guidance with grace and humility, read voraciously, worked with great intensity to deadlines, and wrote with clarity and power. His doctoral topic was the "Krishnaology" of ISKCON's founder, Swami Prabhupada. His personal knowledge of Prabhupada's teaching was vast, he was extremely well-

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informed about scholarship on the Society, and he had innovative and penetrating ideas. In my view, he succeeded in researching his subject-matter with integrity, the requisite criticality, and much originality.

When Goswami's life was tragically cut short, his thesis was almost finished. He placed the last chapter of his dissertation on my desk before he left for India. We were due to discuss it the week after his return. It is my intention to seek to publish the thesis in his name after due formalities have been seen to.

If this can be accomplished, the thesis, I am sure, will be of great benefit to ISKCON and the scholarly world. In a letter to me dated April 18th, 1997, before he was accepted to study at Cambridge, Goswami explained his motivations for seeking a PhD. I quote:

"They are: 1) to explore and understand my own religious tradition by means of the best canons of critical scholarship; 2) to become an effective interpreter of my own religious tradition; 3) an informed participant in inter-religious dialogue; 4) a participant in the ongoing efforts to understand new religious movements within the academy; 5) to share with my own tradition a broader vision of its place in history and the wider contribution it can make to the world; and 6) to participate in the development of

higher education within my own institution".

Here speaks a man of integrity: integrity with respect to his own personal commitment, and integrity with respect to his commitment to critical scholarship. Goswami's thesis succeeds in combining both. From one point of view, ISKCON is in an important phase of transition. Unless it meets the present challenge of implementing Goswami's aims, it will gradually and inevitably sink into a mire of internal and petty squabbles, and lapse into the obscurity of a minor cult. But if it strives to face the world and meet this challenge in the way outlined by Goswami, it has every chance of sturdy and healthy growth, and of contributing to the wellbeing of society at large. Though, as some know, evidence of internecine disagreements in ISKCON has surfaced, there is also refreshing evidence of a number of other members working seriously in academia to meet the objectives outlined by Goswami. Much seems to be at stake. In stating his aims for accomplishing a doctoral degree, Goswami was a courageous pioneer and a man of vision, and an inspiration, not only for his Society, but also for the goals of scholarship more generally. I wish to pay tribute to his dedication, courage and pioneering scholarship.

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