It is one of the most fascinating, and confusing, facts about the history of Hinduism that it displays both conservatism and adaptability to an almost mutually excluding degree. As instruments for dealing with religious plurality these trends have been often described and the positions of some important authors about their application, that is the scope of the valid dharma, have been analyzed. As a result the pre-history of the Indian concept of Hinduism can be formulated more precisely, and, as demonstrated by Halbfass, the continuities and differences between the ‘classical’ positions of, for instance Śāṅkara, Kumāraṇa or Jayanta, and the proponents of Neo-Hinduism, can be outlined.

One work that is often mentioned in this context is Madhusudana Sarasvati’s (16th century) Prasthānabheda, which addresses the issue of integrating various religious and philosophical systems within the framework of Vedism and would therefore hold as a forerunner for a modern conceptualization of Hinduism. Moreover this brief tract on the scriptural sources of knowledge (prasthāna), has been one of the first texts known to Western Sanskritists to present a conspectus of the religious and philosophical literature of the “Great Tradition” within Hinduism. It has been utilized in the early phase of Indological research by Colerbrooke and Weber and continued to play a role in exploring the history of religious and philosophical Sanskrit Literature. Although it would be difficult to estimate its influence on Classical Indology, the impact of the perspective it voices is indisputable. Nevertheless the textual history of this work, its authorship and its context have been determined only insufficiently. Far from being a mere footnote on the study of this text, the pursuit of these questions yields a much clearer picture of the author’s original intention.

An editio princeps of the Prasthānabheda, based on two mss. kept in London, was produced by Weber in his Indische Studien, and was followed by (at least) six reeditions, of which the one in the appendix to the edition of the Sarvadarśanasamgraha in the Anandāśrama Sanskrit Series is perhaps the most wide-spread.
P.C. Divanji had, already in 1933, briefly noted that the *Prasthānabheda* is not an independent work by Madhusudana, but a redaction of a passage in the author’s commentary on verse 7 of the *Śivamahimnastotra*; nevertheless an analysis of the two versions, namely the independent *Prasthānabheda* (P) and the version within the *Madhusūdani* (M) will prove helpful, especially since some recent publications are utterly confused about this text.

The *Prasthānabheda* starts, without a maṅga-verse, with one sentence of introduction, upon which a listing and description of Vedic literature follows:

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atha sarvesaṃ sāstraṇam bhagavatya eva tātparyam sāksat paraṃparayā vety samāśena teṣām prasthānabheda 'troddisyate
| tathāhi rgyedo yajurvedaḥ . . . “All Śastras have their final purport in the Lord, either directly or indirectly; thus their division into [religious or philosophical] systems (prasthāna) is now explained as follows. These are: Rgveda, Yajurveda . . .”
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The introduction in M (to be discussed below) is different, but now from the listing of the Vedas onwards both texts run parallel with mostly minor discrepancies. I would regard the following as major differences:

1. After mentioning the eighteen sources of knowledge M reads *tā eta aṣṭādaśa vidyās trayi sāmkhyaṃ ity anenopanyastah | anyathā nyunataprasaṅgār |* (p. 21) This is a reference to the first line of verse 7 of the *Mahimnastotra* (see below). In P this passage is missing, which is logical, since P is not presented as a commentary, but as an independent work.
2. A long quotation which enumerates Upapurāṇas is contained only in P (p. 18). On the other hand only M provides a complete list of munis (p. 27) as authors associated with the “science of the 64 kalīs”, whereas P simply states that they were composed by several munis.
3. Following upon the description of the Pāṣupatas only M adds a note on other Śaivas: *evam śaivamantrasāstram api pāṣupataśastrantargatam eva draṣṭavyam* (p. 28). Likewise it is said there that the *vaishnavamantrasāstra* is contained in the Pāñcarātra. Then a restricting remark is added: *vāmāgamādīśāstram tu vedābhyaṃ eva* (p. 28).
4. A further discrepancy occurs in the passage in which, according to the version in P, it is stated that “the aim of all authors of prasthānas is in the highest Lord who is to be propounded”. (*sarvesaṃ prasthānakartrnāṁ muninām . . . parameśvara eva pratipādyā tātparyam*, p. 23) The word *pratipādyā* does not make much sense,
since the remark is near the end of the text. It is probably no more than a clumsy attempt to edit out the sectarian remark in M:

\[ \ldots \text{para} \text{me} \text{svar} \text{a eva v} \text{edantar} \text{pratip} \text{adye (p. 29).} \]

5. Finally there is one passage in P that makes only sense in the context of M, since it refers to a word in Mahimnastotra 7: evam āṣṭādaśa vidyās trayiśabdenoktaḥ anyathā nyūnatāprasaṅgat (P, p. 22; M, p. 28).

This leads to the following conclusions: P is an attempt to extract the description of the prasthānabhed from M and efface the references to the Mahimnastotra that would not be understood without the original context; this redaction succeeded in 1, but failed in 5. Whether the revision was done by the author himself cannot be determined with any certainty, but the failure to remove one of the these references (no. 5) points to a less proficient redactor. The comparison thus fully confirms Divanji’s conclusions about the nature of the text. A further, more external, hint is the formula of introduction in both editions of P, “Now follows the division of prasthānas in the work of Madhusūdana [i.e. the Mahimnastotraṭika]” atha madhusūdanaṅktra prasthānabhedaḥ, which makes sense only as a remark by a redactor who wished to indicate the original author. With the words he also indicated the passage that he was going to report, since in M the passage under question starts: prasthānabhedam eva darśayati (p. 21).

However, this means that the intention of the redactor, i.e. to outline a division of “systems”, was not identical with that of the original author, who wished to adjust different descriptive patterns with the prasthānas mentioned in Mahimnastotra 7, upon which he was commenting. In other words the Prasthānabhedā was not primarily intended for the purpose for which it came to be used, that is, as an independent systematic survey of orthodox literature. The passage under discussion is rather an attempt to demonstrate, within the multitude of religions that we call Hinduism, the supremacy of the Advaita Vedānta.16 This, like Madhusūdana’s attempt to devaluate the Śaiva monotheism of the Mahimnastotra by giving a double interpretation of each verse, one referring to Śiva and one to Viśnū,17 is a forced interpretation of the Verse 7 of the Stotra, which runs as follows:18

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{trayi sāmkhya} & \text{yogaḥ p} \text{asupatimatam vaisnavam iti} \\
\text{prabhinne prasthāne pram idam adah pathyam iti ca} & \\
\text{ruṇṭam vaicīryād ryakūṭilananāpathajusām} & \\
\text{nrṣam eko ganyas tvam aśi payasam arṇava iva} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Since the way of religion is diverse, including the Triad of Vedas, the Śāmkhya, the Yoga, the doctrine of Pāṣupatī, Vaiṣṇavism, and one person considers this one best and another person that one suitable – because of the variety of preferences, you
are, for men who favour different paths, straight or winding, the single goal, as the ocean is of waters.

It is obvious from other passages that the Stotra is addressed to Śiva, but without as much sectarian detail as would allow us to determine the peculiar type of Śaivism, to which the author belonged. The only hint is the word paśupatimata in verse 7, which could either mean the “doctrine of Paśupati” in the sense of Paśupata-Śaivism, or merely be a poetical synonym for an unspecified “doctrine of Śiva”. There is, however, external evidence to suggest that the wording was carefully chosen: The earliest written record of this Stotra is found on the walls of the Amareśvara temple at Mándhata and dates either to 1063 or one century later. In this inscription the scribe Gandhadhvaja, whose ability to compose simple Sanskrit was apparently very limited, mentions the “Paśupata teacher” Bhāvasamudra. It is therefore plausible that the Mahimnastotra stems from, or was transmitted in, a Paśupata background. The division of the prasthānas itself can be traced to Mahābhārata 12.337.59: sāmkhyam yogam pañcaratram vedāḥ paśupatam tathaḥ | jñānany etāni rājārse viddhi nānamatati vai ||

Madhusudana, in his comment on the verse, stresses the difference between a direct and [many] indirect ways to the one goal. According to him people resort to indirect ways only because of their inability to distinguish the direct (i.e. Advaita Vedānta) from the indirect. The problem, or chance, for an interpreter is that the direct way is not identified in the text itself; Madhusudana’s peculiar problem is that Advaita Vedānta is not even mentioned. It is, I think, mainly for this reason that he has produced a detailed explanation of the “Vedas”, for without complicated circumlocutions it would have been quite difficult for him to work out the position of the Vedānta. He starts by saying that the five prasthānas mentioned in the verse, include all Śāstras and that the “three” (trayi) Vedas subsume the eighteen āyās, i.e. 4 Vedas proper, 6 Vedāṅgas, 4 Upāṅgas (Purāṇa, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā Dharmaśāstra) and 4 Upavedas (Ayurveda, Dhanurveda, Gāndharvaveda, Arthaśāstra). Within this framework, he says, the Upāpurāṇas are comprised in the section Purāṇas, Vaiśeśika in Nyāya, and Vedānta in Mīmāṃsā. A more heterogenous group is said to be contained in the Dharmaśāstras, namely Mahābhārata and Ramāyaṇa, Śaṅkhyā, Yoga, Paśupata and Vaiṣṇava. Madhusudana thus deliberately distorts the list in the verse by including the remaining items, i.e. Yoga, Śaṅkhyā, Paśupata and Vaiṣṇava in trayi. He thus succeeds in creating one single category “vedic”, under which all other valid prasthānas are subsumed.

What follows in his commentary is a fairly detailed treatment of the *trayi*, namely the Veda, Vedāṅgas, Mimamsā and Vedānta and a rather brief treatment of the last four items mentioned in the verse. Within this description the Vedānta is implicitly presented as the culmination of Vedism. Under the heading *paśupatimāta* he briefly mentions the *Pāśupatasūtras*, and declares that the *śaivaṃ mantraśāstram* is included in this category. This term could refer to the division of “Śaivism” into atimarga, i.e. the Pāṣupatas, and *mantramarga*, which includes the various branches of Tantric Śaivism. The same division is, perhaps mechanically, applied to Vaishnavism: it is identified as Pañcarātra, while the *vaishnavamanastraśāstra* is said to be included therein. But Madhusūdana adds that the Vāma scriptures are not included in any of the preceding categories, since they are – like the Buddhist, which are excluded in the beginning of the text – non-vedic (*vedabhyāya*). In other words Madhusūdana draws a picture of a religion that is not so different from, what we would call, Hinduism, with the only difference that we would also regard the non-vedic (*vedabhyāya*) forms of Śaivism, i.e. Vāma, etc., as part of Hinduism.

Nevertheless this view is historically inaccurate, since the boundary that is introduced into Śaivism between extreme (Vāma, Kaula, etc.) and agreeable forms (Dakṣina) is an outside perspective on Śaivism. The persistence of it has obfuscated the fact that, especially in the early phases of its development, Tantric Śaivism was perceived by its adherents and by its Vedic opponents as a single, from the Vedic perspective, heretic religion that is defined by its unique revelation, the Agamic canon.

Madhusūdana’s concept of acceptable and valid Śastras is therefore more inclusivistic than the view that Śaivism, Vaishnavism, Śaṁkhyā, Yoga, Buddhism and Jainism are all unvedic, but with his rejection of Buddhism and the religion of foreigners it is equidistant to the modern idea of an all-inclusive Hinduism as a world-wide meta-religion.

One other point is worth noting: In the *Prasthānabheda* we have a description of an ideal Vedic religion with only passing reference to religious realities of 16th century Bengal, while the terminology used for the division of religions/sects (i.e. *trayi*, yoga, śaṁkhyā, paśupata, pañcarātra), is, it must be emphasized, used in a text that predates the tenth century, which in turn has quoted it from a much older text. The *Prasthānabheda* is thus a vivid example of the mechanisms of adaptation and conservatism within Hinduism: the erstwhile heretic Tantric Śivaism and Viṣṇuism are adopted as Vedic, while the integrity of the eternal Veda is preserved by merging those “modern” developments into ancient, theologically speaking perhaps timeless, categories.
I am very grateful to Peter Wyzlic for drawing my attention to this work and to Philipp Maas for his comments on this article.


“[…] the contrast between the traditional inclusivistic or perspectivistic patterns and the universalistic openness claimed by Neo-Hinduism is obvious. The traditional “inclusivism” is usually coupled with or even coincides with a more or less explicit exclusivism; at any rate, it is not without formalistic and restrictive ingredients. Modern Hinduism relates its explication and justification of religious plurality to an open, universalized concept of adhikāra”. Halbfass, op. cit., p. 53.

The word prasthāna is used in the sense of vidyāsthāna, for which see Yajñavalkyasmṛti 1.3. See footnote 6 for the edition used.

Paul Deussen used the text for an introduction to Indian philosophy, see: Allgemeine Geschichte der Philosophie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Religionen, Erster Band, Erste Abteilung, Leipzig: Brochaus 1915, pp. 44–64.

A comparable treatment of the vidyāsthānas is by Mitramiśra (1st half of the 17th century) in his commentary Viramitrodaya on Yajñavalkyasmṛti 1.3 (The Yajñavalkya-Smṛti with Viramitrodaya the Commentary of Mitra Misra [...], ed. by Narayana Sastri Khiste, Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series 1930, p. 14).

Nos. 2455 and 2456 in the India Office Library.


ASS 51, Poona 1950. It is based probably on three manuscripts, but the text has been constituted with less care than that of Weber.

“This work [i.e. the Prasthānabheda] in the form in which it is printed in the Vāṇī Vilās press does not seem from its colophon to have been composed by any Madhusūdana Saraswati but some later students seem to have made it out of the commentary on Verse 7 of the Mahimnastotra-tīkā with slight modifications here and there in order to give it the appearance of an independent work”. Siddhāntabindu of Madhusūdana with the Commentary of Purushottama, Ed. Prahlad Chandrashekhar Divanji, Baroda: Oriental Institute 1933, p. viii.


K. Maheswaran Nair (Advaitasiddhi. A Critical Study, Delhi 1990, p. 8) did not understand why Divanji coupled the two texts, while V. Sisupal Panicker (Vedantakalpalatikā – A Study, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications 1995, p. 8f) produces only a clumsy reformulation of the relevant passage in the preceeding volume that is on the verge of plagiarism. Only Sanjukta Gupta (Studies in the Philosophy of Madhusūdana Saraswati, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar 1966, p. xi) has taken
note of Divanji’s findings: “As regards Prasthāna-bheda it would not be proper to consider this book as a separate work. For, the subject matter of this book is followed verbatim in the Mahimnā-stotra-ṭīkā. In fact the entire book is found in toto in the commentary on the seventh verse of Mahimnāstotra. Here we find a list of different branches of knowledge”. One recent publication may also be mentioned here, namely Dīnanatha Tripati’s Madhustānacaritaṃ (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi 1994), although it provides no new information on the Prasthānabhedha. It is a biography, or rather hagiography, of Madhustādana, without any indication of historical sources, but astonishing details on his life.


15 These are variants which alone would not allow us to distinguish recensions. With the thin manuscript evidence at hand no separation of the two versions in micro-readings is possible.


17 Even verse 28, which lists names like bhava, sarva, rudra, paśupati poses no problem for him, since these can be derived etymologically, i.e. stripped of their conventional meaning “Śiva”, and are furthermore used in Sahasranāmastotra (bhavādnām ca harināmatvam yogavṛtyā saṁbhavaty eva sahasrānāmastotpāthitāvāc ceti, Madhustādana, p. 105).


19 See Brown, op. cit., p. 4.

20 For the following, see Brown, op. cit., p. 21, and Epigraphica Indica, vol. 25 [1939], pp. 183–185.

21 He writes -stotim atmasāyārthe svayam likhitam, which the editor N. P. Chakravarti politely corrects to atmaśreyārthā.


23 From his explicit rejection of conceivable Buddhist prasthānas, with the argument that they are not conducive to the purusārthas, we can see that the basic categories are: vedic/valid and non-vedic/invalid.

24 He divides the Veda into vidhi, arthavāda and a third (indubhayavilāsasana) category, which comprises the Vedānta. There he states that the Vedānta is in itself a pramāṇa that, through the purity of mind [attainable through it], reduces all vidhī to a mere appendix (svatāhpramāṇabhātām sarvān api vidhiḥ antahkaraṇasuddhiḥāvā ca svāsēṣatām apiśādāyā), Prasthānabhedha, p. 15f.

25 Compare Kumāralīlā’s list of heterodox formations in his Tantravārttika [ed. Āgāḍhāra Sastry, Benares Sanskrit Series 72, Benares 1902, p. 114]: . . . śūnkhya-pāñcārānapāñcāpāñcaśārayanīrghantā . . . A collection of arguments for and against Tantric Viṣṇism and indirectly also Tantric Saivism is also contained in the Āgāma-prāṇāṇya.

26 We would of course interpret the “Vāma” as referring to varieties of the Kālī cult.

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