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My Journey with Nidān: Looking Back and Looking Forward

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It is a truism that political processes and academic enterprises are inherently linked to one another. I cannot think of any academic enterprise that is free of politics of the state. The story of my journey with Nidān is underlined by the above assumption. I could hardly separate my academic career from the life of Nidān as a journal as it has stayed with me (perhaps I have stayed with it) for the best part of my academic career. Therefore, my journey with Nidān could hardly be told without my academic journey in South Africa.

Let me first begin with how I got to South Africa. After completing my doctoral studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, having declined job offers in the US and Canada, I decided to go to South Africa as my wife who happens to be a South African of Indian origin wanted to return to South Africa in the wake of the political changes happening at the beginning of the 1990s. Most readers of Nidān would know the story of South Africa and its notorious and infamous apartheid system. But I just want to highlight a couple of events that had impacted me. In February 1990 the then President of the country, F.W. De Klerk, unbanned the African National Congress, which was leading the struggle against apartheid, and released Mr. Nelson Mandela from prison. I was just in the process of preparing my thesis for submission. I submitted my thesis in June 1990 and the same month Mr. Mandela was visiting Los Angeles at the invitation of the Black Actors Guild. One of my professors had asked me if I would like to join him to go to the event. I said yes, and off we went and that was my first sight of Mr. Mandela.

After submitting my thesis, I went to the Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University to work with my main supervisor, Prof. John B. Carman who was at the time the Director of the Centre. Prior to that I spent 1988-89 at the Centre with him writing my thesis. This was an unusual arrangement, although my primary Ph.D registration was at the UC, Santa Barbara. In effect, I should have said I returned to the Centre after submitting my thesis to the Religious Studies Department, UC Santa Barbara. I spent a few months at the Centre until the end of 1991 February. I then left for South Africa to take up a job offer made by the department of Religious Studies, University of Natal, at the Pietermaritzburg campus in March 1991. This was an unexpected offer, but suited me well at the time. After two and half years at the University of Natal, I joined the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town in June 1993. In April 1994, I was offered a position at the Department of Indian Philosophy and Hindu Studies at the University of Durban-Westville, which was an Indian university at the time. Those of you who may be aware of the education system of South Africa under the apartheid system would know that the system catered for separate educational facilities for different race groups. I had mixed

feelings about taking up the job not only because the University was well-known as a hot bed of politics, but the man I was succeeding was known as a member of the Broederbond, an Afrikaner Calvinist secret society that promoted the system of apartheid. His name was Prof. Frederich Zangenberg, who was the son-in-law of the famous German Indologist, Erich Frauwallner. Now, Frauwallner was implicated in Nazi connections during the war, as most scholars of Indology would know. After the war, he was stripped of his academic position and was placed under house arrest, deprived of his personal library, during which time he wrote his most well-known two-volume Indian Philosophy text. Zangenberg was Frauwallner's student and married his daughter. In the wake of his father-in-law's arrest, the Zangenbergs headed to South Africa as the country under the newly formed Nationalist government was encouraging Europeans to settle in South Africa in order to increase its white population. Due to his Broederbond connections, I was given to understand, that the Indian community's political leadership viewed him with suspicion, and gradually he became isolated even from his own Indian colleagues at the University. But in my personal encounter with him he came across as a genuine human being struggling with his own identity, and seemed very troubled. In 1995, a year after I took up the position, I was made the Head of the Department of Science of Religion, even though my primary teaching responsibility was still in the Indian Philosophy section. The same year the Chair and the head of department of Hindu Studies resigned to take up a position elsewhere. The mantle of Indian Philosophy and Hindu Studies fell on me along with the responsibility to be the editor of Nidān: Journal of Hindu Studies, which was then a departmental journal.

This is a rather circuitous route to get to my association with Nidān, but I thought it was necessary for me to recount these connections. But before I proceed to talk about Nidān, let me make a de tour to place Nidān in the larger political context of South Africa. Here it is hard to separate religion and politics. Afrikaner Nationalism was born out of a particular view of Calvinism to which the Dutch Reformed Churches of South Africa had subscribed to during the 18th century. It is in a sense an isolationist ideology that rejected European Enlightenment ideals of human rationality and individuality. It is out of these early religious ideas that a secular Afrikaner Nationalism emerged. Although the British were just as responsible for the racially prejudicial practices during their rule prior to the Afrikaner control, the logic of Afrikaner Nationalism went further in their effort to avoid being in a country as a minority community. The logic was quite simple and yet deeply religious—the Afrikaner intellectuals found that it would be "unchristian" not to allow Black people to develop politically and economically. So, the easiest solution was to separate the destinies of the two communities along political and social lines. Thus was born the notion of "apartheid" that allowed the Afrikaners to have their own state and let the Black people live in their tribal homelands, known as Bantustans or also known as Homelands or Independent Republics. To sustain this ideology two key pillars emerged—the Nationalist Party and the Broederbond secret society. The system of apartheid is deeply rooted in their experience of "Exdous" from the British rule in the Cape colony, known as the "Great Trek" of the 1830s. This "Exodus" is metaphorically aligned with the Biblical Exodus, in search of a promised land that God had given

them. The Afrikarners came to see themselves as the “chosen people” of God.

The Nationalist Party was established in 1914 (later came to be known as National Party) in an effort to oppose the anglicising policies of the British on the one hand, and to protect white people from the Black majority on the other. The party went through various formations between the time of its inception and its coming to power in 1948. It became largely instrumental in making various legislations to legalise the system of apartheid. Without having to go into the minute details of the history of apartheid, let me focus on how it impacted on higher education in South Africa, which has direct relationship to Nidan’s emergence and its identity.

In line with the apartheid ideology, the higher education sector had been divided into four racially identifiable parts—Whites, Indians, Coloureds, and Blacks. Higher education institutions were established for these four racial groups as separate entities to provide for their education. Obviously, the cream of the funding went to the white universities and technical educational institutions. But to understand the education system in South Africa, one has to understand the political system that was designed to entrench white privilege. In 1984, the National Party introduced a new constitution for the Republic of South Africa under which three houses of parliament were established based on a fundamental distinction between “own affairs” and “general affairs”. The former was meant for the three race groups—whites, Indians and Coloureds, whereas the latter was meant for all race groups including the Blacks. For this purpose, the National Parliament was established with three distinct houses of legislature—for the whites (House of Assembly), for the Indians (House of Delegates), and for the Coloureds (House of Representatives). Blacks were not included in the National Parliament, but instead under the “general affairs” they were provided for their education separately.

So, under this new constitution, the government of South Africa established 19 higher education institutions—9 for whites, 2 for coloureds and 2 for Indians and 6 for Blacks. The 6 for the Blacks were in addition to the 7 institutions they already had in their homelands under their respective tribal authorities. The institutions meant for the Indian community were—the University of Durban-Westville, and M.L. Sultan Technikon (I am using the Afrikaans spelling), both established in Durban as the largest of the Indian population lived in the Natal province. In designing these higher education institutions, the key principle that the apartheid government used was to separate science and technology as two fundamentally different domains, the former being primarily understood as creating knowledge, while the latter as using that knowledge for a practical purpose. Universities were understood as belonging to the former realm while the Technikons were located in the latter realm. It is not really unusual to make such a distinction as it is quite universal. But it may be horrifying for readers to realise that these distinctions were based on the belief that there is something of an “essence” that separated them. This is the uniqueness of apartheid. Therefore, the universities were not supposed to do what the Technikons were supposed to do and vice a versa, because they were “essentially” different. Although the non-white universities were called “Universities”, by the nature of their internal programmes, their

structures and facilities were in fact nothing more than “Technikons”. In a lot of the cases, some of the lowly qualified white academics were appointed as heads of departments.

The University of Durban-Westville, the Indian university, began as a college on Salisbury Island, close to Durban coast, connected by a causeway. Initially the island, which was nothing more than a mangrove became the Naval Base for the Royal Navy during the Second World War. Even though South Africa became a Republic and Britain gave up all its control, it continued to use South Africa for its Naval Base from Salisbury Island. In 1957, under the Simonstown agreement, the Royal Navy gave up the control of Salisbury Island in favour of Simonstown. And the South African Naval Service operated from Simonstown. Later on, after the Simonstown agreement expired, the South African Navy moved its operations to Simonstown in the Cape while continuing to use Salisbury as its base. It was here in 1961 that the infamous Salisbury College was built for the Indian community, primarily to train them for low key jobs. In 1971, it was upgraded to the status of a University and moved to Durban to its new campus in 1972. Back at the Salisbury College, Indian Philosophy was taught at the department of Philosophy by Prof. Zangenberg. Even after the new University of Durban-Westville was built in 1972, the Indian Philosophy department continued to exist within the department of Philosophy. Subsequently, other departments of Indian studies—Department of Sanskrit and Indian Languages, and the Department of Hindu Studies were established along with the Department of Science of Religion within the Faculty of Arts. Christian Theology enjoyed the status of a Faculty on its own.

After this de tour of South African political and educational landscape, I need to go on to another minor but important de tour to fully place Nidān in its proper intellectual, as well as the history of apartheid’s ideological context.

One of the consequences of the apartheid system, was its negative impact on South Africa in relation to the rest of the world, as much as it might have produced social and political security for the whites in general and for the Afrikaner in particular. From the stand point of Nidān as a journal, one key area it affected was the activities surrounding intellectual and knowledge production at higher education institutions in South Africa. As the country was gradually isolated from the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and the rest of the world, and despite significant hurdles, scientific and research activity continued unabated, with South African institutions contributing significantly to scientific knowledge in many fields. From heart transplant to military hardware, wildlife preservation as well as minor inventions of adhesives used in aircraft manufacturing (known as Pratley Putty, named after the inventor Mr. Pratley), a swimming pool cleaning instrument known as “creepy crawly” (named for its crawling at the bottom of the swimming pool to remove sediment), etc., South African scientists were at the forefront of scientific collaboration. The fields of social sciences and humanities too, produced significant scholarly research. However, in the face of the increasing isolation of South African institutions, the Department of Higher Education and Training sought to incentivize universities for them to produce

research and publish. Although the idea was meant in good faith to encourage quality scientific research, university administrations blatantly abused the system in order to gain access to government funding and so, put enormous pressure on academics to publish. The more one published, the more funding was given to the concerned university, as the formula tilted more towards quantity rather than quality. In the wake of intellectual isolation, especially in the 1980s, South African academics were forced to publish in South African based journals, which were for the most part, established within the context of various departments. This resulted in the proliferation of academic journals within South African universities. However, during the apartheid era, South African journals, particularly in the fields of social sciences and humanities were already heavily censored and monitored through a dubious system of journal accreditation. This was primarily to prevent activities of sabotage, communism, and terrorism through various publication channels. Scholars who participated through their academic work in any of such activities were isolated, jailed or exiled.

It is in this sort of environment of South African academia that Nidān as a departmental journal of Hindu Studies was born in the late 1980s with its first issue published in 1989. This was almost the tail end of the apartheid system. The then state president, Mr. De Klerk announced the unbanning of the African National Congress in early 1990 and released Mr. Mandela from prison in February 1990. The late arrival of Nidān on the academic landscape of South Africa, however, had less to do with the emerging developments of the late 1980s, but rather, more to do with the establishment of the department of Hindu Studies, and resourcing it took much longer than expected due to lack of qualified academics in the field. Nevertheless, it must be said, that Nidān too shares in the apartheid cultural finger prints, in the sense that it too was used to promote the university's share of the Department of Education funding. Right up to the mid-1990s, it suffered from the problem of quantity vs. quality and the inbred abuse that had internal staff members publish their own research, with dubious review processes.

Nidān, due to being a departmental journal; the chair of the Hindu Studies department was automatically made the editor. Prof. T.S. Rukmani (formerly retired from Miranda College, Delhi) who was hired as the chair of Hindu Studies in 1993 tried in vain to raise the standard of the journal and she left the university in 1995 to take up a position in Canada. As mentioned above, I became the journal editor of Nidān, when I was handed the headship of the Hindu Studies department in 1996, even as I continued as Head of Science of Religion in 1996. I too had the same problem with the journal's standard, and at the expense of becoming unpopular among my own colleagues, tried in vain to make it as international as possible. But the practical problem was that under the funding formula of the Department of Education, the journal could not receive funding for papers published by overseas scholars. By the mid- 2000s, I reached a vexing point and started to disregard the Department of Education funding at the expense of some unhappiness from the Research Office of the university. I began publishing papers by overseas scholars along with a few local ones that were properly reviewed using a double-blind review process, and gradually

worked on raising the standard of the journal. I had to fund the journal from my own research grants received from the National Research Foundation of South Africa. This bold move was specially made possible, when I made a contract with the South African academic journal distributor, Sabinet, to market the journal both within Africa and beyond. This not only brought-in some additional income for the journal's editorial expenses, but more importantly, it helped positioning the journal beyond Africa by spreading it to around 33 countries largely in the West, but also in the East. By this time I was competing with the Journals of Hindu Studies in the US and UK and found myself at a cross-roads, to review the future prospects and goals of the journal. It was in this regard that I decided to close the Hindu Studies Journal after the two issues of 2015, and launched a new journal with a new ISSN number and called it *Nidān: International Journal of Indian Studies*. This was an effort to broaden the scope of the journal, with two issues per year, while retaining the intellectual product brand name of "Nidān". The broadening of the journal's scope did not come out of the blue, but was a result rather of a realization that the journal had already become broader in its scope out of necessity. Even in its earlier phase, it did not just serve Hindu Studies, but also other disciplines such as history, Indian languages, fine arts, music and drama, as long as they had some reference to India. The first two issues of the new journal were published in 2016, and by that time, I had already retired from my university in Durban, South Africa.

Around this time I came into contact with Dr. Deepra Dandekar who showed an enthusiasm in becoming involved with the journal as a guest editor. Thus began her journey with Nidān. I gradually took a back seat and gave the reigns to Dr. Dandekar, finally stepping down from the editorship in 2021. Ever since Dr. Dandekar has taken over, the focus has shifted more to contemporary issues in Indian studies, and this has brought-in a new and fresh outlook, not only to the journal's physical appearance, but also, more significantly to its content. The time has now come to locate the journal outside South Africa. Fortuitously, that shift has become possible with the support of the Heidelberg University library and publication division (Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing or HASP) situated at the Centre for Transcultural Studies (CATS) and the renowned South Asia Institute (SAI) in Heidelberg, that graciously accepted to publish the journal and make it open-access. Through Dr. Dandekar's skilful negotiations, and the cooperation extended by the Heidelberg University staff members, Nidān is now poised to become more internationally available to readers. I wish to thank Dr. Dandekar and all the guest editors who have joined the journal and made Nidān a journal of scholarly importance in the field of Indian studies over the past many years. I am also grateful to Sabinet and the American Theological Library Association for their distribution of Nidan in various countries. I also wish to thank all the reviewers who have provided their free time and scholarly insight to ensure that the papers we published were of good academic standard. Last, but not least, I owe a special debt of gratitude to the many members of the editorial board who have generously allowed me to use their scholarly status in association with Nidān and for giving their scholarly support for the work of Nidan. Those who are continuing to be on the editorial board, and those who have left it at various points in time, I thank them all most sincerely for their support and collaboration with

Nidān. I am pleased to see Nidān taking off to new destinations under Dr. Dandekar's new leadership. and I wish her every success in the future, especially as the journal finds its new home at Heidelberg University. I will continue to be associated with the journal as its academic advisor, and hope to offer my support for the new phase of Nidān.

As we say in South Africa, Hamba Kahle. Thank you!