A CRITIQUE OF KLOSTERMAIER’S  
‘A SURVEY OF HINDUISM’  

Shrisha Rao  


The aforementioned book is well known to scholars of South Asian Studies, and  
is widely used, especially in the United States, as an undergraduate text.  

There however are serious questions about the soundness of the author’s methods,  
and thus about the veracity of many of his claims, especially those that relate to  
Madhva (13th cent. CE). These problems have not hitherto been noticed by the  
scholarly community.  

Both editions of the book contain a large number of factual errors; while some  
of these errors have been fixed in the second edition, there is no mention therein  
of the earlier errors, and no list of errata is provided. As many copies of the first  
edition continue to be used, it is likely as not that readers of said first edition will  
continue to be misled.  

The most striking error in the book is the following (p. 422, second edition):  

[Madhva] then went on a missionary tour, engaging Jains, Buddhists,  
and Advaitins in discussions and defeating them not only by the power  
of his words but also with the help of a king who, on Madhva’s insis-  
tence, had thousands of Jains impaled and exiled other infidels.
As a matter of fact, the biography of Madhva, “considered authentic” according to Klostermaier himself on the very same page, fails to mention any such king who impaled Jains at Madhva’s insistence and exiled other infidels. There is no warrant for presuming any similar actions or attitudes on Madhva’s part, king or no king. No other scholar, including B.N.K. Sharma, who wrote the definitive *The History of the Dvaita School of Vedanta and Its Literature* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi; 2d edition 1981, 3d edition 2000), mentions anything to support these claims either, and Klostermaier makes his accusation without indicating a source. The fabrication is also seen elsewhere—on page 59 and page 254 Madhva is described as “the hammer of the Jains,” again without any source being indicated in support.

Where on the one hand Klostermaier has failed to give a source for this audacious claim, that thus must be considered his fabrication, in at least one instance he also fabricates a source—see endnote 19 to chapter 27 (p. 576) where he says, “See also B.N.K. Sharma, *A Comparative Study of Ten Commentaries on the Brahmasūtras* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1984).” A work titled ‘A Comparative Study of Ten Commentaries on the Brahmasūtras’ (which Klostermaier offers as evidence to show that the ten recognized commentators on the Brahmasūtra are those he names) has not been written by the alleged author, who disclaims Klostermaier’s notion that there are “ten recognized Vedāntācāryas.” The website of the alleged publisher lists no such monograph even by any other author.

Besides these questionable scholarly practices, Klostermaier also gets his facts wrong on several occasions. Immediately after the portion earlier cited (p. 422), we read:

The image of Kṛṣṇa that Madhva installed at his Udipi matha is still an important focus of pilgrimage and the rotation of the headship of the matha, taking place every twelve years, is also a major social occasion about which newspapers report. Madhva was the most prolific of all the great Vedāntins; he left more than thirty major works as well as a number of minor ones. In addition to the traditional com-
mentaries on the Gītā, the Upanisads, and the Brahma Sūtra, he wrote commentaries on the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the Ṛgveda, and portions of the Mahābhārata, along with several philosophical monographs and short summaries of his own commentaries, the most famous of which is the Anuvyākhyaṇa, a masterful exposition of the Brahma Sūtra in eighty-eight verses.

The following are some of the errors in the above:

- Rotation of worship in the Kṛṣṇa temple in Uḍupī takes place every two years.³
- Madhva wrote partial commentaries on the Bhāgavata Purāṇa⁴ and the Ṛg Veda⁵, but a digest covering the entire Mahābhārata⁶. He wrote no “summaries of his own commentaries.”
- His work called the Anuvyākhyaṇa consists of close to two thousand verses⁷, not eighty-eight.

Elsewhere, Klostermaier says (p. 352):

The second [sampradāya] is the Brahma-sampradāya, founded by Madhva, also called Ananda Tīrtha or Pūrṇa Prajña. Beginning as a Daśa-nāmi, Madhva became Advaita’s bitterest (sic) enemy. Madhvites are largely restricted to the South, where they keep custody over the mathas established by the founder. In former times, they must have been quite numerous. Among their peculiar customs is the adoption of a name of Viṣṇu and the branding of the body with a red-hot iron to imprint upon it forever the cakra of Viṣṇu.

It is grossly inaccurate to describe Madhva as having been a Daśanāmi sannyāsī, when in fact the designation of Daśanāmi was unknown in his time, and when his
biography fails to make such a claim. The statement that Madhva (as against his disciples and later followers) established madhas is inaccurate, as is the implication that followers of his tradition are rare (as opposed to having been “quite numerous” in the past).

Neither is naming a child after Viśṇu a practice peculiar to Madhva’s tradition, nor are all Mādhva children necessarily named this way. The practice of taptamudrā-dhāraṇa described here by Klostermaier (and also on p. 229 and p. 254) is derived from the Pancarātra literature, and is also followed by the traditions of Rāmānuja and Nimbārka.

The description of Madhva’s tradition as the Brahmasampradāya is a neo-classical (post 18th cent.) and doctrinally incorrect one (inasmuch as Madhva does not trace his heritage to Brahmā).

A few other glaring factual errors can be noted briefly:

- In one instance (p. 248), the name Mādhava which is an epithet applied to Viśṇu, is confounded with ‘Madhva’!
- Madhva’s dates are given wrongly (p. 485) as 1197-1276, whilst Sharma has conclusively shown them on the basis of literary and epigraphical evidence to be 1238-1317.
- Klostermaier says (p. 380) that the calling of Śāṅkara’s Advaita as crypto-Buddhist is the work of “some of the followers of Madhva,” while Sharma has again pointed out that it may be found in the writings of authors before Madhva such as Bhāskara, Pārthasārathi Miśra, Yādavaprakāśa, and Rāmānuja.

There are other errors that are only found in the first edition of Klostermaier’s book, but correction of which is not noted in the second. The most significant of these is on page 76 (first edition), where we read:
The present edition of the *Mahābhārata* itself speaks of three beginnings: *manvādi*, beginning with Manu, corresponding to the first twelve parvans (“chapters”) of the present work; *āstikādi*, beginning with Astika, comprising *parvans* 13 to 53; *uparīcarādi*, from *parvan* 54 onward.

The statements are incongruous with the fact that the whole of the 'Bhārata only contains 18 *parva*-s, as also noted by Klostermaier himself (p. 77, first edition).

The story of the Mahābhārata is also summarized wrongly in the first edition—Klostermaier would have us believe (p. 79, first edition) that the Pāṇḍavas spent the thirteenth year of their exile (which had to be spent incognito, “in the very court of Duryodhana, without being recognized, and [appeared] at the beginning of the fourteenth year before the king to reclaim their kingdom. But Duryodhana is no longer willing to give up his empire. Thus, both parties prepare for an all-out war.”

In fact, all recensions of the text are agreed that the Pāṇḍavas spent their incognito year in the court of king Virāṭa, and a complete *parva* of the Epic, called *virāṭa-parva*, is devoted to this part of their story. Near the end of the year, Bhīmasena, one of the Pāṇḍavas, killed Virāṭa’s powerful brother-in-law Kīcaka for attempting to molest Draupadī. Upon hearing news of the mighty Kīcaka’s death, Duryodhana decided to attack Virāṭa’s kingdom and steal his cattle, suspecting that the deed could only be the work of the Pāṇḍavas, and also calculating that Virāṭa’s kingdom would be weak, being sans Kīcaka. The attack was thwarted and Virāṭa’s kingdom saved, in large part owing to the heroic martial deeds of the Pāṇḍavas upon the occasion. However, Duryodhana insisted that the Pāṇḍavas had revealed themselves before the year was up (although his grandsire Bhīṣma and other counsellors advised otherwise), and insisted that they go back to the forest. This set the stage for the great war, in which Virāṭa was an important ally of the Pāṇḍavas.

A passage that only appears in the first edition (p. 382) of Klostermaier’s book says something strange about Madhva:
On his North Indian tour, he also met with a Muslim ruler. The Muslim intolerance of Hinduism might have been one of the factors that could explain Madhva’s un-Hindu intolerance toward other opinions and some of his stranger views.

It is not clarified that according to Madhva’s biography\(^{12}\), the Muslim king who met Madhva was so impressed that he offered the latter half his kingdom! Certainly Madhva is not indicated by his biographer to have encountered any “Muslim intolerance of Hinduism.” Even granting Klostermaier’s imagination in this matter, it is not at all clear why “Madhva’s un-Hindu intolerance of other opinions” should be focused solely toward Advaita and other Hindu theologies, while completely ignoring Islam; indeed, “Madhva’s un-Hindu intolerance” is seen in full measure even in his earlier works that date from before his meeting with the Muslim king.

**Conclusion**

Klostermaier’s book has been widely accepted as an authoritative treatment of its subject. However, it would seem to appear that a greater degree of care is called for in quoting the book’s claims in scholarly works. Impressionable students should likewise be advised to use the book with caution. Eventually, it would perhaps be best if the book were replaced entirely by a more accurate monograph that treats the subject, and it is this author’s hope that the scholarly community will exert itself in such a direction.

**Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Ramesh Rao for drawing his attention to Klostermaier’s book, and Vicky Maloy for research assistance. Kesava Tadipatri commented upon previous drafts, while B.N.K. Sharma gave important clarifications.
Notes

1In a private communication, Sharma dismisses this allegation against Madhva by Klostermaier as “a pure concoction,” and points out that Klostermaier instead should have mentioned the true fact that centuries before Madhva, the Buddhists had such a rough time at the hands of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (8th cent. CE) that they were forced to flee *en masse* to Cambodia, Thailand, Tibet, and other parts East, causing Buddhism to all but disappear in India. Jainism, while never rising to such strength as Buddhism once did, never suffered such a severe decline either.

2Private communication, 2002. Sharma points out that his *The Brahmaśūtras and Their Principal Commentaries* (3 vols., Munshiram Manoharlal, 1986) deals with *three* “principal” commentators on the Brahmaśūtras, not ten.


4“Madhva’s *Bhāgavata-Tātparya* (B.T.) is a selective commentary in some 3600 granthas. Out of a total of 18,000 verses of the Purāṇa, he has commented upon some 1600,” Sharma, *HDSV* 129.

5“[Madhva] illustrates his thesis with reference to the first three Adhyāyas of the I Aṣṭaka (Maṇḍala i, Sūktas 1-40) … The purpose being illustrative, [only] some forty Sūktas of the I Maṇḍala are chosen for comment.” Sharma, *HDSV*, 181-182.

6“The historical value of [Madhva’s] *Mbh. T.N.* lies in its being the earliest *datable* running commentary on the Epic, in Sanskrit. It is not, of course, a commentary in the strict sense of the term. But, in so far as it traverses the entire course of the history of the Kuru Pāṇḍavas, without omitting any of the major incidents, its importance to the “text criticism” of the Epic becomes considerable; all the more so, when we have it from Madhva himself that he had travelled all
over the land in search of mss. of the Epic, collected a good number of them of various recensions and then fixed the standard text for himself to follow and comment upon.” Sharma, *HDSV*, 134.

7“The *Anuvyākhyāna (AV)* is both a dissertation on the Sūtras and a critical commentary and supplement to the B.S.B. Its extent is 1985 granthas, as against 2000 of the Bhāṣya.” Sharma, *HDSV*, 122.

8See the discussion of this matter in Sharma, *HDSV*, 195-200.

9See V. Varadachari, *Agamas and South Indian Vaisnavism*, Prof. M. Rangacharya Memorial Trust, Madras, 1982, 448, where an extant Pancarātra text called Viṣṇu-Rahasya is cited upon this point; also see page 421 of the same source.


11Sharma, *HDSV*, 144-5.

12*gāmbhīryaṁ dhṛtimuruviryaṁāryabhāvaṁ tejo’gṛyaṁ giramapi deśakālayuktāṁ; rājaśya sphaltamupalabhya vismito’smai rājayārdhaṁ sapadi samarpayāmbhūva*, verse 10.18: “Upon seeing [Madhva’s] stature, nobility, brilliance, erudition, appropriate to the time and place, expressed so clearly, the astounded king offered him half the kingdom.”

Last updated April 22, 2003.