

Upanishadic Hinduism : Quest for Ultimate Knowledge

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Whoever strives to write on Hinduism, or any aspect of it, is sure to face the challenge of explaining Hinduism, for no one knows who founded Hinduism and there is no beginning point or central text you may rely upon to locate its beginning. Extremely diverse is its tradition marked by so wide a range of practices and beliefs that it is almost impossible to generalize the term 'Hinduism'. The religion that Hindus practised before the arrival of the British people used to be called *Dharma*. I think we should elaborate on the difference between the terms *Dharma* and *religion*.

To non-Hindu scholars, particularly the European ones, Hinduism still presents the greatest difficulties. The multiform nature and the inner contradictions of Hinduism are responsible for these difficulties. Even within Hinduism, one person's sacred scripture is not necessarily someone else's. This individual may allocate a minor role to a deity whom another worships with deep devotion as the supreme divinity and lord of the world. One man preaches that no harm should be done to creatures, whereas another man's altar is wet with the blood of sacrificed goat or buffalo. One believer's Tantric practices are, so to say, loathed by others. Even the doctrine of reincarnation, considered to be the mainspring of Hinduism is not a universally accepted part of Hindu teaching and faith.

It is certainly worth mentioning that no

Indian religion called itself 'Hinduism', it is a word invented by the Europeans, as they supposed it to designate the religion of India. The fact is that when the term was coined, not enough was known about the Hindus. Naturally, it was not possible for them to realize that Hindus had a number of different religions.

Let us now see how the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' originated. I here reproduce what Heinrich von Stietencron says about the origination of the term 'Hindu':

Ultimately it all goes back to the names of the great Indus River which flows from Tibet through Pakistan into the Arabian Sea. From its old Sanskrit name Sindhu comes the name of the Pakistani province of Sind. We owe our words 'India' and 'Indians' to the Greek name of this river, Indos. The same name is called Hindu in Persian, and, as in Sanskrit, this word also indicated the land through which the river flows; in the first instance, the province conquered by the Persians, on the river itself, and then the rest of the country beyond that, India. The plural of this geographical name stood for the people who lived there, the Hindus, 'the people of the Indus' or 'the people of India' or the Indians.

From around the year 1000, Persian-speaking Muslims from Afghanistan and Central Asia came over and invaded India as plunderers. Later after 1200 they came over to India to build an empire and subjugated large parts of India. They even managed to convert a fraction of the people to the

religion of the Prophet Muhammad. They designated as Hindus the Indians who would not convert to Islam and who were also not Buddhists. In fact, the concept of Hinduism, as a religion, is a modern Western creation imported into India. Some interpret it as covering all forms of religion originating here, including Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, but most limit it to those forms which revere the scriptures called the Vedas.

Hinduism, bewilderingly varied as it is, encompasses an immense collection of Sanskrit scriptures, a wealth of sacred rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies which deal with every aspect and stage of life; the caste structure of traditional Indian society; multitudes of holy men and ancient and modern religious preceptors or gurus; a wide variety of philosophies; the worship of innumerable deities; and, above all, a vast, rich, colourful and dramatic mythology which, while shaping and moulding the imagination of millions, overlaps and intermingles with the speculations of the Upanishads and their interpreters. John Hick in his book, *Fifth Dimension*, quotes, Lipner (*Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 1994, Routledge, London and New York, P. 5) who has aptly likened Hinduism to an ancient banyan tree. He says:

From widespread branches [a banyan] sends down aerial roots, many of which in time grow rich and strong to resemble individual tree-trunks, so that an ancient banyan looks like an interconnected collection of trees and branches in which the same life-sap flows. . . . Like the tree, the Hinduism is an ancient collection of roots and branches, many indistinguishable one from the other, microscopically polycentric, macro-cosmically one, sharing the regenerative life-sap with a temporal foliage which covers most of recorded human history.

The theme that Hinduism preaches has

become almost universally accepted and the theme is that we are immersed in *samsāra*, the beginningless and endless rounds of rebirths through which we live out our *karma*, the causal effect of our mental and physical action.

Karma and reincarnation

The *karma* and reincarnation are closely interlinked. The themes of *karma* and reincarnation have been prevalent in the East for centuries and they gradually permeated the thought of the world. *Karma* stands accepted as a universal law. L. H. Leslie-Smith quotes H. P. Blavatsky, author of *The Secret Doctrine*, a seminal source of esoteric wisdom, to say that the ‘most important aspect of universal law . . . is the law of adjustment, of balance, of causation called Karma.’ She goes on to say that she calls it “the Ultimate Law of the Universe, the source, origin and fount of all the laws” which exist throughout Nature. The *karma* is the unerring law which adjusts effect to cause on the physical, mental and spiritual planes of being.’ (p. 39).

The root meaning of *karma* is action and hence its application to the whole of nature, including humanity, because action is involved in all manifestations. Every man finds himself caught up in a maze of human relationships through action. The doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation, while proffering a scheme of law explaining the evolution and life and death, shows a pattern that expounds the world teeming with many human problems. They offer a unique philosophy for living and an unrivalled basis for moral values.

Human potentialities unroll slowly but surely, subject to the law of adjustment which educates and teaches people through experience until they come to realize they have responsibilities to perform not only to their fellow beings, but also to other

kingdoms of Nature. Only what is worthy of the immortal centre within each one of us is entitled to survive. We should rid ourselves of such separative qualities as pride, possessiveness and selfishness, and, at the same time, discard the illusory toys on which the world sets a great store, if we really desire to return to our native purity of soul, through which divine light and wisdom is believed to manifest in a human being.

Now a few words about the transmigration of the soul which explains the cycle of *karma* and reincarnation.

Hindus believe that life by itself alone would have no meaning; its meaning in Indian thought is conceived as a link in a chain of births, extending from the past into the future. K. S. Mathur in his article entitled 'Hindu Values of Life: Karma and Dharma' included in *Religion in India* (p. 63) refers to an old Brahmin living somewhere in Madhya Pradesh, who expressed this belief in the following words:

A worldly existence is a stage of transition from past existence towards future worldly lives. Life is a process. It does not start with a child's birth; it does not end with a person's death. Life and death are merely landmarks in one of a series of phases of worldly existence. When a child is born or a person dies, there is merely a shift in his position. It is like an actor acting on the stage, then their going behind the curtains and changing, and then reappearing on the stage in a new garb. But he is the same man. Krishna said in the *Gita* that just as a man discards old clothes and [accepts] new ones, the soul discards worn and torn bodies and assumes new forms.

The transmigration of soul is, thus, governed by *karma* which controls births and deaths. Interlinked with *karma* is *Dharma*. These two concepts considered together, the belief stands on the firm ground that the form and destiny of one's

worldly existence is determined by the behaviour of the individual (*jiva*) in its previous worldly existences or incarnations. The idea revealed in this statement is that a man's body, character, capacities, temperament, his birth and station in life, his wealth, the whole of his experience of pleasure, pain and misery, if considered together, constitute the just recompense for his past deeds—good and bad. Every act clears itself out, so to say, in retribution in a subsequent rebirth.

Dharma

Now, let us deal with the other concept, that is, *Dharma*. *Dharma*, though often understood to be synonymous with religion, covers a wider domain as it comprises the general conditions of individual existence and worldly action and even operates in the plant and animal kingdom. Hence there exists a great difference between the Hindu understanding of religion guided by the concept of *Dharma* and the Christian or the Islamic. *Dharma*, in the opinion of the orthodox Brahmanism, is a single normative principle that governs religious, ethical and practical human behaviour. If this principle enjoins partially different norms of behaviour upon the various strata of society (the warrior's code, for example, is not the Brahmin's), that does not have a negative effect on the universal validity of *Dharma*. *Dharma*, on the contrary, controls and structures behaviour at every level of society and assigns to every creature its own *dharma* (*svadharma*) which consists in observing particular rules and performing tasks and duties. *Dharma* is, thus, construed both as a universal ethical norm—it approaches realization in a society founded on the Vedic tradition—and as a prescription for individuals and groups regarding the tasks they have to perform, the morality they have to adhere to, and the social behaviour

or the religious practices they should commit themselves to.

‘Hinduism’, as we have got to know, is a Western construct designated to imply the dominant religion of the majority of the people inhabiting the South Asian subcontinent. The Hindus account for seventy per cent of the population of the Indian peninsula. They are said to have descended in part from the Aryans who in early stage of the world’s history made their way across the Himalayas from the high plateau, the cradle of the Aryan race. John Drinkwater tells us in this connexion that ‘all the great European races—the Latins, the Teutons, the Celts, and the Scandinavians – are of Aryan descent, as are the people of Persia.’ (1953 : 91) However, prior to their arrival in the Indian Peninsula, armed with their religion and culture, India was thickly populated. There still persists a controversy as to the theory that the Aryans arrived in India from outside. Vyaas Houston, an eminent Indologist, in his Introduction to David Frawley’s *Gods, Saints and Kings*, says, ‘Where did it (Sanskrit) come from?—a language infinitely more sophisticated than any of our modern tongues. How could language have been so much more refined in ancient times among a people, the Vedic Aryans, whom scholars tell us were nomadic barbarians from the north.’ (2003 : 11) Houston then adds, ‘The obvious truth is that there must have been equally refined and advanced civilization which evolved along with the language over a long period of time’ (p. 11). The comments by Vyaas Houston I have just quoted point to the fact that Sanskrit language and literature is being practised avidly outside India where it itself originated.

Swami Arunananda in his book *Hindu Shāstra Parichay* challenges this theory and boldly asserts that the Aryans did not come

from outside; they were born in this country. According to the geologists, he says, the soil of the Punjab, through which flow five rivers, is the most ancient. In the soil of the Punjab the Aryans originated. ‘They were righteous and that is why they were known as Aryans.’ (2003 : 07). He also quotes Manu as saying, ‘The scholars call as “Brahmāvarta” the god-built large country in between the rivers Saraswati and Drishaswati. The practices that the people of the *Chaturvarna* (the four social castes of the Hindus, that is, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) and other castes have been observing through the ages are called virtuous conducts.’ (p. 7). Swami Arunananda does not stop there. He quotes Max Müller as saying about the religious and literary excellence of the hymns of the *Rig Veda* in his famous book *Origin and Growth of Religion*: ‘One thing is certain, there is nothing more ancient and primitive, not only in India but in the whole world, than the hymns of the *Rig Veda*’ (2003 : 07).

Hinduism is so complex and labyrinthine in content that one faces an immense difficulty in interpreting it, relying upon only one text, because no particular text is considered authoritative by all people. Besides, there is no lack of Hindus who tend to think of their religion as clued up on a way of action rather than in a written text. To lessen the difficulty in seeking a fundamental text, one has to make a selection of the principal Upanishads. ‘The group of texts known as Upanishads have played a decisive role throughout Hindu religious history; they have defined central philosophical issues in India for centuries and continue to be a major source of inspiration and guidance within the Hindu world today’ (2004:27). The Upanishads illustrate and symbolize a great chapter in the history of human spirit and presides over philosophy, religion and life for more than

three thousand years. Every subsequent philosophical movement has had accorded with their philosophical movement. Apropos of the influence of the Upanishadic thought in India and beyond, Says S. Radhakrishnan,

Their thought (the thought of the Upanishads) by itself and through Buddhism influenced even in ancient times, the cultural life of other nations far beyond the boundaries of India, Greater India, Tibet, China, Japan and Korea and in the South, in Ceylon, the Malay Peninsula and far away in the islands of Indian and Pacific Oceans. In the West, the tracks of Indian thought may be traced far away into Central Asia, where, buried in the sands of the desert, were found Indian texts (2007 : 17).

About the Upanishads

Now about the Upanishads. The earliest Upanishads were composed in Northern India around eighth century BCE. Groups of learners used to sit down near the teacher in order to learn the secret doctrines from him. In the solitude of the forest hermitages the Upanishadic thinkers devoted themselves to ruminating on the problems of the deepest concern and transmitted the knowledge they had acquired through meditation to the pupils.

The Upanishads encapsulate accounts of the mystic gravity of the syllable *Aum*, and explanations of different mystic words comprehensible only to the initiated and detailed analyses of secret texts and exoteric doctrines. They also envisage a theory of the universe. The *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* stresses an ardent metaphysical quest for the absolute ground of all being. It espouses as one of its principal tenets a single, unifying principle, the basis of the entire universe. The world of multiplicity reveals itself at the level of ultimate realization as one of interconnected unity. The attempt at identifying that unifying principle can be seen in a famous passage involving the

philosopher Gārgi Vacaknavi and Yājñavalkya. Gārgi involves Yājñavalkya in a discussion on the ultimate nature of the world, challenging him to explain the very foundation of all existence. Gārgi asks Yājñavalkya:

Since the whole world is woven back and forth on water, on what, then is water woven back and forth? Yājñavalkya responds, 'On air, Gārgi.' But Gārgi is not satisfied with this answer. 'On what, then, is air woven back and forth? Yājñavalkya replies to another question, and then another, still another as Gārgi presses him to identify the increasingly fundamental layers of reality. Finally, the sage reveals to her that the entire universe is woven back and forth on what he calls 'Brahman'. At this point he claims that he can go no further; Brahman is declared to be the end of Gārgi's search (2004 : 28).

Although other entities such as space and water were put forward as being the possible foundations of all beings, Yājñavalkya sort of gave the thumbs down to them, saying that the One Ultimate Reality and the absolute ground of being was identified as Brahman which was thought of as the highest aim of all metaphysical enquiry. Brahman is the sole Reality. Stephen H . Phillips quotes Sriharsa, the twelfth-century dialectician, as saying apropos of the attributes of Brahman:

1. Brahman is self (ātman) and consciousness.
2. Brahman is world ground.
3. Brahman is transcendent of names and forms (*nāma-rupa*).
4. Brahman is unitary, the coincidence of opposites and omnipresent.
5. Brahman has non-dual (*advaita*) self-awareness.
6. Brahman is the essence or the finest part of everything.
7. Brahman is the locus of value, and awareness of Brahman is the supreme

personal good (*parama-purushārtha*) and liberation (*mukti*) from fear and evil.

8. Brahman is mystically discoverable.
9. Brahman is beyond the power of thought uninformed by mystical awareness (1997 : 09).

To recognize that all of life is to imply a theory of human nature and the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* advocates this theory. This theory teaches that all beings are our kin. If we regard human and other beings as our kindred, then the essential self of a human being gets radically and automatically linked to all beings. The ultimate Self the Upanishads call Ātman is but a part of this interrelated network of reality that lords over all beings. While talking about the Self, this Upanishad says that as are all the spokes fastened to the hub and the rim of the wheel, so are all beings, all the goals, all the worlds, all the breaths and all the bodies to one's Self.

The *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad* speaks of another self which is transitory and separate from other selves. This self is ego (*ahamkāra*) identified with the body and the social environment around it. By this self we identify ourselves when asked 'Who are you?' This self we concern ourselves with is neither the ultimate Self nor the true identity of a human being, because the Ātman, the ultimate Self, cannot be defined and identified with anything. The Ātman is ungraspable and undecaying. He is beyond grasp, nor is it subject to decay. Since he does not stick to anything, nothing sticks to him. Although he is unbound, yet he does not tremble in fear. Quoted in *Ten Theories of Human Nature* is the following message from the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*: '... this Self is Brahman—this Self that is made of perception, made of mind, made of sight, made of breath, made of hearing made of earth, made of water, made of wind, made

of space, made of light and the lightless, made of desire and the desireless; this Self is made of everything. Hence there is this saying: "He's made of this. He's made of that"'(2004 : 32). Thus, the Ātman is the immortal and unchanging Self which is beyond the reach of hunger, sorrow, thirst, delusion, old age and death and is not different from the highest reality of Brahman. The Ātman is the knower of all knowledge or perceiver of all perceptions. Being, the perceiver of perception, not an object, the Ātman cannot be known in any ordinary way, because it is Consciousness Itself.

The Upanishads emphasize the fact that our present life is but one in a long series of deaths and rebirths. With the termination of our present life we are reborn in a new body. Like a caterpillar moving from one blade of grass to another we move from one body to another.

The main problem that sort of bedevils human existence is ignorance about the true nature of reality. Most of us die with the ignorance about this imperishable and eternal truth. We never think for a while that the span of human existence is short-lived. We must know, the Upanishads constantly tell us, that we are the imperishable Brahman. It is of course very difficult to attain this knowledge of Brahman, because It sees, but cannot be seen, It hears, but cannot be heard; It thinks but cannot be thought of; It perceives, but cannot be perceived. It is owing to the lack of true knowledge of the unified and infinite Brahman that one perceives only the ordinary objects of consciousness and has to rest satisfied with identifying oneself with the dying world characterized by fragmentation and transitory forms. Ignorance about the true nature of reality leads to the ignorance regarding our own selves.

Two schools of thought

Before concluding this article I shall mention briefly only two schools of thought that belong to Upanishadic Hinduism, one viewing ultimate Reality as an impersonal absolute and the other stressing a kind of personal relationship with this Reality. Shankara (788-820) represents the first school and Rāmānuja (1017-1137) the second. This divergence of views is based on widely different interpretations of the Upanishad and the *Brahmasutra*.

To Shankara, the proponent of the first school, do we owe Advaita Vedanta in the form in which it is still today referred to as the typical and the best-known philosophy of India. Shankara, in addition to being a supreme scholastic thinker, was a remarkable religious poet. His stanzas eulogizing the goddess *Shakti* or *Māyā*, considered among the most prominent examples of Indian devotional verse, express a remarkable aspect of his spirituality. Though, surprisingly, he sets aside *Māyā* in his philosophical writings and solely concentrates on the transcendence of Brahman, the 'One-without-a-second', he devoutly eulogizes the second, ie *Māyā*, Mother of the universe, and 'with all sincerity, expressing the mode of divine dualistic experience on the plane of bhakti, where the devotee regards and understands himself as the creature and servant of the deity-in-human-form' (2005 : 461).

I reproduce below the poem quoted by Zimmer:

Thou who bearest manifold world of the visible and the invisible;
Who holdest the universe in Thy womb!
Who severest the thread of the play we play upon this earth!
Who lightest the lamp of wisdom; who bringest joy to the heart of Thy Lord, Siva!
O Thou, Queen Empress of holy Benaras!

Divine Bestower of Food Inexhaustible!
Be gracious unto me and grant me alms!
(2005: 461)

Let us now discuss Shankara's philosophy of non-dualism. Shankara interprets Bādarāyana's *Brahmasutra* which was an early attempt to systematize the philosophy of the Upanishads. Shankara's commentary on the *Brahmasutra* is still regarded as the most famous philosophical text widely alluded to.

According to Shankara's philosophy of non-dualism, the appearance of a multiplicity of things is but an illusion (*māyā*); only Brahman is real. The ultimate Reality is Brahman which is Pure Consciousness, devoid of all attributes (*nirguna*) and all categories of the intellect (*nirvisheshā*). Brahman syndicated with potency (*shakti*), *māyā* or *mulāvidyā*, reveals Itself as the qualified Brahman (*saguna Brahma*) or the Lord (*Ishvara*), as the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of this world which is but His appearance.

Jiva, the individual self, is a subject-object complex, the subject element being consciousness called *Sākshin* and the object element, the internal organ, called *Antahkarana* that is comprised of five elements. The element '*teja*' that predominates over other four elements keeps active the internal organ when it is awake. *Avidyā* or ignorance, the source of the internal organ, imbues it with individuality. The moment a sense organ gets on to an object in perception, the internal organ takes on the form of that object, as is its mode (*vritti*). The Pure Consciousness helps the mode to assume the form of empirical knowledge. 'In waking state, the internal organ is aided by the senses; in the dream state, it functions by itself; and in deep sleep, it is lost in its cause *Avidyā*.' (1991 : 252). In this sense, too, individuality keeps on, owing to the association of the

Pure Consciousness with *avidyā*. In liberation the *avidyā* is destroyed by *jnāna* (knowledge) to enable the Pure Consciousness to be realized as Brahman.

Avidyā, in the true sense, is not illusion, nor is it absence of knowledge; it is also positive wrong knowledge, a cross between the real and the unreal. In fact, it cannot be described in proper terms, because it is neither existent, nor non-existent or both. It is not existent, for what is existent is Brahman. Again, it is not non-existent because it is responsible for the appearance of Brahman as the world. (1999 : 253).

From this phenomenal point of view, Shankara teaches that the world appears quite real to those who have not yet gained the true knowledge, who are sleeping under ignorance. To enlarge upon his view, Shankara distinguishes between the dream state and the waking state. The things we dream remains true so long as the dream lasts; they are transmuted as soon as we get awake. Dreams are private, because they are the creations of the individual self, and the world is public because it is the creation of Brahman. Ignorant of the essential unity, the individual self takes diversity for granted and boasts of himself as the agent or the enjoyer. Ignorance conceals the unity from him and projects before him names and forms. The highest Brahma (*Parabrahma*) is both the locus and the object of him. When the individual self comes to realize this through knowledge, leaving aside *karma*, only then he can pierce through the locus-object barrier to the essential unity that precedes liberation.

Rāmānuja's *bhedābheda* theory

Now let us turn our attention to the philosophy of Rāmānuja. 'For Rāmānuja, the difference-non-difference (*bhedābheda*) position, which he associates with Bhāskara (c. eight-century BC), but in actual fact seems to be the position outlined in the

Brahmasutra itself, is inadequate because it implies that an unqualified Brahman can undergo modification' (2000 : 225). Brahman, the Lord (Ishvara) endowed with personal qualities as he is, is the *Saguna Brahma* subject to a real transformation (*parināma*) 'in the creation of individual selves (*jivātman*) and an insentient world (*jagat*)' (2000 : 225). The Creator then is not regarded as different from his creation, but not as an impersonal Absolute as the Advaita tradition wants us to believe. But the question that crops up out of this thesis is: How can we understand the relationship between Brahman and the created world?

The answer is that the relationship between the individual self and Brahman, one of non-difference though it is, is not one of unqualified identity. Among so many individual selves stands only one Brahman as the Supreme Self (*Paramātman*). Likewise, individual selves are not identical to the world which itself is not identical to Brahman. Brahman indulges in the eternal play of transforming Itself into the universe and into a multitude of individual selves.

Rāmānuja preaches three distinct modes (*prakāra*) of existence, the plurality of individual selves, the insentient world in which are reborn individual selves, and the Supreme Lord of that realm. He goes on to enlarge on the relationship between the individual selves and the Supreme Lord. Akin to the relationship between the individual soul and the body in which it dwells is, according to Rāmānuja, the relationship between Brahman and the individual selves. As its inner controller, Brahman 'ensouls the universe.' Brahman remains the sole reality, the principle of existence itself, and the individual selves are 'modes' (*prakāra*) of Brahman, that is, Brahman in a certain state of being (*avasthā*). In this state then the self is indeed not different from Brahman (2000 : 226).

(Continued to page 40)