HINDU MODELS OF DIVINITY

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1 Introduction

Wilfred Cantwell Smith – notably, in The Meaning and End of Religion – champions the view that religion is best understood as the living, vital faith of individual persons rather than as an abstract set of ideas and doctrines. He argues that we must abandon the tendency of ‘reification’, of ‘mentally making a religion into a thing, gradually coming to conceive it as an objective, systematic entity’ (Smith 1978: 51). The idea is that we must refrain from imposing an essentialist understanding on religious phenomena. This is particularly true of Hinduism; it is best understood as a set of heterogeneous phenomena both in the high-form and the folk-form. Any attempt to characterise Hinduism as a unified set of essential theses is likely to fail. The sacred texts of the Hindus, the Vedas, are variously interpreted by the six traditional Hindu philosophical schools. Even within a single school, philosophers disagree on the import of Vedic statements. The characteristic Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth and the associated doctrine of dharma lack a fixed interpretation in the Hindu corpus. The Mahābhārata, a voluminous and arguably the most important epic in the Hindu tradition, constantly reminds the reader that the notions of dharma (righteous action), sukarma (right action), vikarma (forbidden action), and akarma (non-action) are subtle and hard to comprehend. If anything, the Mahābhārata illustrates that dharma is, as Lipner (1996: 121) puts it, ‘a polycentric concept, and its responsible implementation in a particular case is the result of a personal decision arrived at within the existing rational and other guidelines available’. Indeed, Lipner (1996) argues that ‘a dynamic polycentricism’ is the chief characteristic of Hinduess, although not of Hinduism, thought of as a religion. Lipner following Smith’s characterisation regards Hinduism (and other religions) as being intrinsically plural (1996: 111). Hinduism then, according to Lipner, can be best thought of as a family of religious traditions that resemble each other in that its participants share the distinctive attitude of ‘Hinduness’. This dynamic of polycentrism manifests itself both in the high-form and the folk-form.

Hindu intellectual traditions must be understood as standing for the collection of philosophical views that share a textual connection to certain core Hindu religious texts, the Vedas. There is no single, comprehensive philosophical doctrine shared by all intellectual traditions in Hinduism that distinguishes their view from contrary philosophical views associated with other Indian religious movements such as Buddhism or Jainism on issues of epistemology, metaphysics,
logic, ethics or cosmology. The Vedas are regarded as *apaurusेयa* (not borne out of human agency), but by the same token they are not the Word of God either. They are supposed to have been directly revealed, and thus are called *śruti* (what is revealed or heard), in contrast to other texts, which are called *smṛti* (what is remembered). It is commonly believed that the Vedas were composed over a near millennium from the fifteenth to the sixth century BCE. The Vedic corpus comprises four works, each called a ‘Veda’: the Rg, the Śāma, the Yajur, and the Atharvā. The corpus of the Vedic texts is divided into four distinct sections in chronological order: Mantras, Brāhmaṇas, Āranyakas, and Upaniṣads. Even though at a first glance the Vedas appear unequivocally polytheistic, various strands of monism and scepticism find expression in them. These strands, in turn, find expression in the Hindu philosophical schools that encompass a variety of attitudes to God (and gods) ranging all the way from atheism to monotheism. Contrary to common perception, polytheism is absent from traditional Hindu philosophy in its high form. Most of the classical schools of Hindu philosophy do not accept a notion of God at all; if they ever do, it is in a sense very different from the Semitic tradition. God cannot intervene, for example, to pardon sins, or, as Hindus put it, He cannot mitigate the fruits of karma. For this reason, God and gods are considered omniscient and omnipotent, but never benevolent.

The six philosophical schools Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṁkhya, Yoga, Pūrvamīmaśā and Vedānta arose around the fifth century BCE, primarily to defend the authority of the Vedas under challenge from Buddhist, Jain, and Carvāka (Materialist) heterodoxies. These schools specialise in different philosophical domains, albeit with significant overlap. The polycentrism referred to above manifests in the specific philosophical enterprises of these schools: Nyāya excelled in logic, epistemology, and reasoning; Vaiśeṣika in pluralistic metaphysics; Sāṁkhya in dualist (matter and consciousness) metaphysics; the Yoga in improvised techniques for liberation; the Pūrvamīmaśā in perfecting the interpretation and defence of the ritually oriented part of the Vedas; and Vedānta in epistemology and monistic metaphysics. All these Hindu schools engaged in intense metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical debates among themselves and with the heterodox schools.

In contrast, Hinduism as a folk-religion has always been polytheistic. In the ritual-centred worlds of the Vedas, many gods were recognised but no one God was supremely located at the centre of the Vedic world view. The Vedic rituals relate to a number of deities, each identified with an aspect of the natural world: Indra (the king of the gods: god of rain and war); Surya (the sun god); Agni (the god of fire); etc. The Vedic Hindus had no idols, icons, or personal relationship to a single deity, the religious rituals centred on the sacred fire. The Vedic Hindus considered their offerings to the fire as the fulfilment of their end of a cosmic partnership between them and gods and ancestors, rather than as a means to propitiate the gods. Over a period of time, the older pantheon of Vedic gods lost favour and were replaced at the folk level by two new deities, Vishnu and Shiva, enshrined in the Purānic literature that flourished around the second century CE. This period also coincided with the building of temples, idol worship, and the emergence of various cults and sects. In addition, many regional and local deities were incorporated into the Hindu lore during this period: for a rural majority the most important deity is the village goddess (*gramadevata*), also called Earth goddess or Mother, who presides over fertility of animal and vegetable life, and over pestilence and disease. The parochialism of Hindu gods does not stop at small communities and villages; households have their very own family deity (*ghardevata*) who could be a male or female spirit and whose primary function is to protect and sustain the household. The simplest way to mark the distinction between the high form and the folk form is to talk of ‘gods’ for the polytheistic folk-level and of ‘God’ for the monotheistic creator referred to in the Hindu philosophical systems.
The brief description above illustrates dynamic polycentricism as an endemic feature of the Hindu religious world view. It should come as no surprise, then, that there are various models of divinity in Hinduism. Gods and terms like ‘the mighty one’ and ‘isvāna’ (Lord) appear frequently in the Vedas. However, the central Vedic concept is that of Rta: the natural and moral order that regulates and maintains the cyclic universe and everything within it. It is not until later, in Śvetāsvaratā Upaniṣad, that we find the ingredients of a theistic world view. Here a personal god is acknowledged as the omniscient and omnipotent Supreme Being, and an attitude of bhakti (devotion) towards him is deemed appropriate. However, the notion of God is not made absolutely clear as the text oscillates between the Supreme Being as saguna Brahman (a personal God endowed with qualities) and as nirguna Brahman (Ultimate Reality without qualities); in other words between monotheism and monism. The theistic notion of God becomes important much later in the Purānic literature, and particularly in the Bhagavadgītā. Only then the aforementioned schools of Hindu philosophy – which could and did function without a God earlier – were compelled to find ways to incorporate theism that had gained currency in the wider folk imagination.

The relationship between the high form and the folk form of Hinduism has been a much debated topic among the scholars. Some see the folk practices as a consequence or residue of the grand theories of the Hindu philosophical systems; others, particularly anthropologists, see the popular culture and the regional traditions as acting more or less independently. In what follows, it will become clear that both these views are mistaken. Popular Hinduism certainly carved its own space with its many gods, specific rituals, and practices, but philosophers could not ignore the proliferation of rituals and gods, they needed to accommodate the practices. The late arrival of theism in Hindu philosophy suggests that it was the popularity of folk-level theism that influenced the Hindu philosophers to incorporate gods into their systematic philosophical doctrines. There is also lively debate among scholars whether Hinduism should be characterised as monotheistic or pantheistic or a blend of monotheism and polytheism (as well as pantheism, henotheism and, of course, some atheistic strands). Wendy Doniger, for example, claims that Hinduism is clearly pantheistic and monistic, and monotheism is a later colonial imposition (Doniger, 2010). This view is seriously mistaken: monotheism is strongly defended in later Nyāya philosophy (third–fifth century CE), a school that was also the first to develop a rational theology. However, given that this enterprise was driven by a need to account for popular polytheistic and henotheistic practices, it is striking that they ended up positing a far-removed monotheistic creator God. Finally a robust bridge between theory and practice – the high-form monotheism and the folk-form polytheism – was erected by the Vedānta philosopher Rāmānuja (about tenth century CE).

In Section 2, below, we take a closer look at the models of divinity in the Vedas. In Section 3, we look at later high-form theism, specifically of the Nyāya School – the only School that attempted to develop a rational theology in the Hindu tradition. Then, in Section 4, we explore models of divinity in the folk-form of Hinduism, and finally in Section 5 we examine Rāmānuja’s theses on theism that relate philosophical theory to popular practice.

2 Divinity in the Vedas

Ritual practice and discovery of self serve as sufficient and coherent centres for the world view of the Vedas; there was no obvious need for God as the centre of religious intelligibility (Clooney, 1999, p. 524). The connections between the rituals and the cosmos are discussed in the early parts of the Vedas, but these connections are fairly arbitrary. In the later part, the Upaniṣads are concerned with the deeper significance and meaning of these rituals. It is here that the power of the ritual is identified with Brahman, the underlying foundation or principle of the entire cosmos and all the beings within it (Flood 1996, p. 84). The significance of ritual practice in the Vedas is
tied up with the central concept of Rta, the cosmic law, which maintains the natural and moral order of the cosmos, according to the Rgveda. Rta is an abstract metaphysical principle that governs the cyclic creation and dissolution of the physical universe. Rta ensures that all created beings fulfil their true natures when they follow the path set for them by its ordinances, on pain of calamity and suffering. The gods are never portrayed as having command over Rta; like all created beings, they are also subject to Rta, and their divinity resides in their serving it as executors or sovereign protectors. Actions performed in conformity with Rta are the actions prescribed according to one’s dharna. The law of karma is just a manifestation of the cosmic law as it applies to individual beings. At this level it is closely tied with the central theme of self discovery and knowledge in the Vedas. As a natural and moral theory, karma guides the action of an individual and determines the (re)birth (including jati or caste), length of that life, quality of its experiences, etc. Consequently, the obligatory karma, or dharna, of an individual is also determined by it. Karma is literally translated as action, though it also means the results/residues acquired on account of that action. Simply put, the theory just says ‘as you sow, so shall you reap’. But, and this is the distinguishing factor of the theory, the dictum is not restricted to a single lifetime in the history of an individual. Rather, it applies to an individual in the continuous cycle of birth and rebirth regulated by karma. The theory of karma presupposes that an individual (e.g., god, human, animal, plant, inanimate matter, etc.) is essentially an eternal, indestructible soul (atman) which persists over lifetimes in different bodies and forms. This cycle of birth and rebirth is bound to suffering and the aim of the theory is to guide the individual to escape this cycle by achieving the highest state of existence, moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth). Moksha, rather than attainment of swarga (paradisical abode of the gods; equivalent to heaven in Hinduism), is the highest aim of human existence. The denizens of swarga too are tied to the cycle of birth and death: any swarga dweller can be reborn in a different plane – including the lower ones of the earth or the narka (hell) – and in different forms – including the lower ones of human, animal, or inanimate – depending on the quality of their karma. Since the moral and natural order of the universe is sustained by Rta, and created beings are regulated by karma, there is no requirement to posit a God for the preservation of order in the universe.

The Vedas do, however, refer to many deities, male and female, personifying aspects of nature. The most prominent is Indra, the king of the gods and the god of war, who wins battles for the Vedic Aryans. In addition, there is the Surya (sun god), Agni (fire god), Varuna (god of light; also the guardian of Rta), Mitra (god of contract to ensure regularity in the universe; also the sustainer of mankind), Rudra (the destroyer) and Yama (the god of the dead), and Bhudevi (the Earth goddess). All these gods are minor, themselves subject to Rta and karma. None of them have the power to intervene in Rta or mitigate the deliverances of karma. These gods are involved in rituals and sacrifices, they are honoured guests who descend to earth and invisibly seat themselves in their appointed places in the sacrificial field and join the sacrificial feast by taking the oblations offered to the sacrificial fire. In return, the gods give light, sunshine and rain, essential for sustaining human life. The efficacy of the sacrifice is determined by the exactitude of performance; the precision compels results. The elements of the sacrifice were identified with parts of the cosmos and the sacrifice itself was regarded as a re-enactment of creation and seen to play an indispensable role in its sustenance. The early Vedic attitude towards God is clearly sceptical, as is illustrated by this famous hymn (from the Rg Veda, 10.129, translated in O’Flaherty 1981: 25–26):

1 There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomless deep?
2 There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

3 Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.

4 Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of time. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

5 Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

6 Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of the universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

7 Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.

This sceptical attitude is carried over to the Upanisads (the last part of the Vedas), where a pupil questions the Upanisadic sage about ‘How many gods are there, really?’ The answer finally settled upon after much argumentation in the dialogue is ‘One’. This is not an endorsement of monotheism, because the description of the ‘One’ in the Upanisad suggests monism rather than monotheism. The Upanisad identifies the ‘One’ with Brahman, the ground of, and explanation for, everything that exists, without qualities or properties, and with nothing excluded from it. This ‘One’ is not conceived of as a personal God, even though the Upanisad says it may be variously called Indra, Varuna, or Mitra. In fact, in the Bhādarāṇyaka Upanisad it is claimed that the ‘One’ can be described only in negative terms, ‘Neti, Neti’ (Neither this, nor that).

The impetus for a theistic reformulation of Hindu philosophy resulted from its popularity in the wider community, especially with the expansion of Shavite and Vaishnavite movements into mainstream Hindu sects. But this theistic tendency was balanced by strong voices of atheism within the Hindu philosophical schools with some, e.g., Sāṅkhya, rejecting the idea that the existence of a God is required to render the world intelligible. Others, e.g., PṛyāvṛtīMśā, were unabashed atheists, and vehemently argued against a God-centred reformulation of Hindu religious world view since it conflicted with their central belief that the Vedas are the ultimate authority. There were also strong opponents of theism among the heterodox traditions: the Buddhists and the Cārvākas (materialists) who rejected God as an unnecessary and problematic posit. Nyāya School was among the first Hindu philosophical schools to succumb to the popular pressure to incorporate a God as a world-maker. However, their arguments needed to stand up to the scrutiny of fierce dissenters from both within and without. The Nyāya philosophy aimed at providing an argument which was rationally compelling and culturally credible: a tall task. We look at this next.

3 Nyāya concept of God

Nyāya scholars typically think of themselves as offering a rational theology. They accept rationalisation as one of the possible ways – among others, like learning about Him through the scriptures and the practices of meditation – of knowing God. According to the Nyāya, faith and reason are independent, but mutually supportive, paths for knowledge of the divine. The earliest discussion on God in Nyāya, and indeed in all Hindu philosophy, is found in the original Gautama Nyāyasūtras 4.1.19–21:

131
4.1.19: God is the cause; because we find fruitlessness in the actions of men.
4.1.20: It is not so; because as a matter of fact no fruit appears without man’s actions.
4.1.21: Inasmuch as it is influenced by Him (God), there is no force in the reason put forward.

These śūtras are concerned with the examination of the theory that God is the cause of the universe, but the import of the terse argumentation is hard to interpret. Some scholars argue that the śūtra 21 rejects the need for postulating a God. However, the earliest commentaries on the Nyāyasūtras (written in about 3rd–5th century CE), Vatsyāyana’s (Bhāṣya) and Uddyotakara’s (Varttika), suggest that this is an argument for the existence of God. Śūtra 21 is interpreted by Vatsyāyana as suggesting human effort is efficacious only with divine help, hence the reason put forth in śūtra 20 is superfluous; human action is necessary but not sufficient for production of fruits; therefore, we must posit a God as guarantor of the efficacy of human action. Vatsyāyana is thus putting forth a moral argument for the existence of God: the necessity of a God who dispenses the appropriate results of one’s previous merit and demerit karma. For this reason, the early Naiyāyikas posit an omniscient, omnipotent and intelligent divine being. Vatsyāyana also comments that God does not need to act: He has already obtained all the fruits of his actions; but He continues to act for the sake of his created beings just as a father acts for the sake of his children.

Uddyotakara’s commentary on the Nyāyasūtra 21 offers a different interpretation of the argument. He explains that ‘things are influenced by God’ insofar as He is the efficient cause of things. God does not create ex nihilo, the material cause of the things is available to God in the form of atoms of earth and other substances. This proof, also called the Nyāya argument from ‘producthood’, became the most enduring and developed argument for the existence of God in Nyāya Philosophy (Dasti 2011: p. 4). The argument simply states that the existence of a conscious agent, a maker, is to be inferred from the fact that earth and the like are produced effects. It is best thought of as an inductive proof spelt out clearly by Phillips (2010):

1 Earth and the like have an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.
2 For they are effects.
3 (This is) like a pot (which has an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause), and unlike an atom (which is not an effect); where an effect, there an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.
4 Earth and the like are similar (fall under the rule).
5 Therefore earth and the like have an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.

The argument itself does not mention God; it merely establishes an intelligent world-maker. The Nyāya argues further that only God can fulfill this role, since no ordinary maker would be capable of making the world. The maker must have knowledge of atoms, individuals, and karmic merit and demerit that are the material causes of the world. The complexity, nature, and extent of knowledge demands an omniscient God who possesses comprehensive and eternally present knowledge. The argument for the eternity of God’s omniscience is based on the grounds that God lacks a body, sense-organs, and mind (the necessary instruments for cognition). His cognitions and thus His knowledge cannot be produced and, therefore, must be eternally present. Nyāya argues that God as the world-maker cannot have a body on pain of infinite regression; since bodies themselves are impermanent and thus in need of makers. A similar argument is used to establish God’s omnipotence, since only a being with unlimited power can control all atoms, individual selves and their karma without a body. Jayanta in his Nyāyamanjari (written about 9th century CE) further adds that God always succeeds in whatever He intends and undertakes; thus God is always satisfied and never in need. The fact of omnipotence is also presented by Jayanta as
a reason for monotheism, since it is not possible for there to be several, potentially competing, omnipotent Gods. The Hindu atheist Mīmāṃsāka philosophers argued that the postulation of a creator God is unnecessary and problematic, and it interferes with the claim that the Vedas are the ultimate authority. Jayanta turns this Mīmāṃsāka argument on its head: after establishing the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient world-maker he simply uses an argument from economy to add that God is the guarantor of the Vedas; It makes no sense to assert that the world has one maker and the Vedas another, nor that there are many makers composing the Vedas; it is simpler to assert that the world and the Vedas are made by the same maker, God.

The Nyāya corpus on arguments for the existence of God is largely neutral with respect to any particular sect or tradition. Udayana in his Nyāyasumāṇjali (a treatise composed, in about the 10th century CE, to establish the existence of God) begins with the statement that the existence of God is accepted by everybody in some form or another: if he is a Shaivite, he worships God as Shiva; if he is a Vaishnavite he worships God as Vishnu; if he is attached to the sacrificial cult, he thinks God to be the being to whom offerings are made in the sacrifices, … ; if he is a Mīmāṃsāka (the avowed Hindu atheist) he thinks of the deities commended in the Vedic hymns as God; if he is a Nyāya scholar he thinks of God as a being endowed with all of the above-mentioned attributes which can rationally be ascribed to Him; and, if he is a Cārvāka (the heterodox materialists and atheists) he takes God to be the being whom common people regard as God. This long list makes clear that Nyāya philosophers are certainly not sectarian: no religious sect or tradition or even the atheists are excluded on the basis of having alternative ideas about the nature of God; they are excluded on doctrinal grounds or on account of social and moral behaviour that accompanies such ideas. Thus Nyāya theology is strikingly pluralistic and inclusive.

The atheist Mīmāṃsākas rejected the idea of a world-maker on the basis that the widely held Vedic idea of creations and dissolutions (the Ṛta) does not sit well with the idea of a world-maker. Their main concern is that the imperfect and ever changing world does not give the impression that it would have been created by an omniscient and omnipotent God. Why does the perfect (omniscient and omnipotent) maker create a temporal, contingent and imperfect world, which is filled with pain and suffering? Jayanta’s answer to this question draws attention to the distinction between God’s infinite perfection and his guidance of finite beings in an imperfect world. Recall that God does not alter the moral order of the universe which is dictated by Ṛta and karma; He is simply added on to the non-theistic tradition as a guarantor to ensure that just rewards and punishments are doled out to individuals. The concern about the success of the inductive proof for the existence of God is echoed by Buddhists, who suggest that the Nyāya induction overreaches: it is grounded in experience of ordinary common artefacts and ordinary makers which cannot support the inference of a wholly unique God-like maker. The Cārvākas (materialists) questioned the proof on grounds that induction in general as a method of proof is suspicious. The Viśistadvaita Vedānta theists also question the inductive proof for the existence of God on the grounds that existence of God cannot be known through reasoning alone; reason must be supported by the testimony of the scriptures. But, as we have seen, the testimony of the scriptures is ambiguous on this issue. There are allusions to polytheism, monism, henotheism and even scepticism in the Vedas. Thus the appeal to scriptural testimony does not cut much ice. I do not want to evaluate the success of the arguments of the ancient philosophers in extensive detail, for they have been adequately covered in the contemporary literature.3

From a Western perspective, the Nyāya proof for the existence of God can be thought of as a hybrid of the cosmological and teleological arguments. Like the first, it aims to establish a fundamental, regress-stopping, efficient first cause of the universe. (The Nyāya God gets the atoms moving and combining in a certain way.) Like the second, it says that the efficient cause must
be an intelligent agent because it is not the mere existence of the physical universe but its complexity that demands an explanation. This point is widely debated in the literature: some scholars prefer to think of the Nyāya proof as an argument from design (Dasti, 2011, p. 5), but I agree with Patil (2009) that it is best construed as a hybrid. However, this hybrid version is unlike the hybrid theory of mind of Lewis (1994), which combines functionalism and identity theory in a manner that avoids the shortcomings of both the theories. Rather, the hybrid Nyāya proof for the existence of God inherits the weakness of both cosmological and teleological arguments. It suffers from standard rebuttals of these arguments when treated as rational arguments for the existence of God. Again, I will not discuss the failure of the rational arguments for the existence of God; they have been adequately covered in the contemporary literature. That the rational argument attempted by Nyāya fails to stand up against the concerns raised by their contemporaries should come as no surprise; there are no rationally compelling arguments for the existence of monotheistic Gods. How does the Nyāya conception of a monotheistic, omnipotent, and omniscient God fare in terms of cultural credibility? Nyāya tries to accommodate the polytheistic and diverse traditions by presenting a pluralistic and inclusive theology which implicitly echoes the Upaniṣadic philosophy, ‘That One appears as many’. However, note that their intent is to show that the monotheistic God is known in His various forms. The Nyāya are ontological pluralists – they believe in many real substances, qualities, universals, distinct individual souls, etc. They clearly reject the Upaniṣadic monism that there is only one reality, Brahman: God, atoms, individual souls, and merit and demerit are distinct existences. God is only the efficient cause of the universe, not its material cause. Therefore, the Nyāya theology does not speak to the prevalent practices in the Hindu, which were much influenced by the monistic and polytheistic strands in the Vedas.

4 Popular Hindu traditions and their concepts of god

The Purānic literature, including the great epic verses Mahābhārata (the popular Bhagavadgītā is a section in this verse) and Rāmāyana, are the texts that define popular Hinduism. Though originally composed in Sanskrit, they are written in a style accessible to the masses. The great epic poems are non-sectarian composite works in which many deities and many different modes of achieving salvation coexist. The Hindus, at popular level, have a Trinity of high gods: Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer) and Shiva, the destroyer (for re-creation). To these are added a plethora of secondary gods, each with a specific function and possessing a specific range of powers: Ganesha (the god of Success; son to Shiva); Parvati (goddess of love and benevolence; consort to Shiva); Saraswati (goddess of knowledge; consort to Bramha); Lakshmi (goddess of wealth; consort to Vishnu); etc. The Vaishnavites also believe that Vishnu can take on avatars, specific forms (human, animal or human-animal) of worldly existence to rid the world of evil: avatars are endowed with characteristics specific to their form. Even though there are specific sects or cults in Hinduism, singular devotion to one specific god is not required. Simultaneous propitiation of several deities is common practice and is accepted as practical and necessary, since different gods control different realms and have different powers. Though there are Hindu temples dedicated to a specific god, most have idols of various gods and avatars. There are specific religious practices and rituals associated with different cults, for example the Shavites regard meditation and learning as most important; the Vaishnavites focus on idol worship and devotion (bhakti); the Shaktas (followers of Tantras) celebrate the body and its pleasures, etc. In the folk-tradition god is conceived of in various ways: the protector of Dharma (Krishna; also lover par excellence); the upholder of dharma and the destroyer of evil (Rama); the protector of Brahmans (Brighu); the slayer of demons (Kāli), etc.
The Bhagavadgītā is the first text to take cognisance of the fact that there are different forms of worship prevalent in the culture. It endorses four forms as means to mokṣa: Karma-yoga (the path of action); Bhakti-yoga (the path of devotion); Dhyāna-yoga (the path of meditation) and Jñāna-yoga (the path of knowledge). Bhakti-yoga, the path of devotion, is the most popular folk form of worship. It requires complete surrender to God in the expectation that his grace will lift the bhakta (devotee) to mokṣa. The idea is that the devotee surrenders her actions to God in the hope that God will guide her towards selfless action which alone, according to the law of karma, can lead to mokṣa. According to the Bhagavadgītā, actions are unavoidable, and in turn, generate positive or negative karmic residues that bind us further to the cycle of birth and rebirth. Since God cannot interfere with karmic law, the only way for the devotee to perform selfless action to achieve mokṣa is to think of oneself as a mere cog in the wheel of karma or a mere puppet whose strings are in God’s hands, and pray for deliverance.

However, it was Rāmānuja in the eleventh century who gave a final theological basis for the Vaishnava bhakti movement which had gained tremendous popularity among the Hindus. Rāmānuja is very clear that he is not offering a rational theology; for him reason alone cannot establish the existence of God. I think the best way to understand Rāmānuja’s philosophical project is that it attempts to offer a bridge between theory and practice, a much needed integration of the doctrines of Hindu philosophy and practices and rituals. He derives his inspiration not only from the Upaniṣads, but also from the Bhagavadgītā and the Purāṇas. This we look at next.

### 5 Vedānta concept of God

The Viśiṣṭa-dvaita School (literally, qualified non-dualism) within the Vedānta tradition is the only other (than Nyāya) Hindu philosophical school with an elaborate theology. Its founder Rāmānuja’s system provides a philosophical basis for popular Hindu religious practice. The Vedānta philosophers saw themselves as interpreting and developing arguments in support of the Upaniṣadic doctrines, primarily their monistic strands. Śaṅkara, the most influential thinker in this tradition and the founder of the strict non-dualist (Advaita) School, argued that unqualified (nirguṇa) Brahman is the only thing that is ultimately real and that the individual soul (atman) is identical with it; all plurality is only an appearance, an illusion (maya). Rāmānuja admits that there is non-duality (advaita) but this non-duality is viśiṣṭa (literally ‘qualified’) by difference; his doctrine is often described as ‘identity-in-difference’. Rāmānuja identifies Brahman with God (Vishnu), holding that Brahman is, i.e., possesses qualities and can be personified as God (Vishnu). God is described positively as essentially possessing five characteristics: being, knowledge, bliss, infinitude, and purity; and also a host of other non-essential properties.

Rāmānuja put forward an organic conception of the universe using the analogy of body and soul: the body modifies the soul and has no separate existence from it, yet it is different from it. Similarly, the world constitutes God’s ‘body’, modifying Him, yet having no separate existence from Him. The view is hard to understand. What does it mean to say that the world is the ‘body’ of God? The first strategy used by Rāmānuja is to quote from the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (III. 7. 15):

> He who dwells in all beings, who is within all beings whom all beings do not know, of whom all beings are the body, who controls all beings from within, he is your Self, the inner Controller, the Immortal One.

In his famous commentary, Śrī Bhāṣya, on the Brahma-sūtras (also known as the Vedāntasūtras), Rāmānuja clarifies that the difficulty in understanding the phrase ‘the world is God’s body’ is rooted in a very narrow understanding of the term ‘body’. According to him, ‘Any substance of a
conscious being which can be entirely controlled and supported by that being for the latter’s own purposes, and whose proper form is solely to be the accessory of that being, is the “body” of that being (Śrī Bhāṣya II.1.9, quoted in Lipner 1984: 147). Lipner emphasises that ‘body’ in this sense is not necessarily a material thing; it could well be a finite conscious self (atman) which is to be the ‘body’ of the infinite supreme Self (Brahman); the only condition that is to be met is that ‘body’ in this sense can only be predicated on a substance related only to a conscious agent. Thus the ensouler–body relation in this context is asymmetrical, wherein the conscious being or ensouler is in the dominant position. Lipner also clarifies that ‘world’ in the statement ‘the world is Brahman’s body’ is to be understood simply as the ‘aggregate of finite conscious and non-conscious beings … especially of such beings in their empirically manifest form’ (Lipner 1984: 148). The ensouler–body, Rāmānuja explains, is manifested both at the macrocosmic level (God-world) and at the microcosmic level (Individual finite self-body).

Rāmānuja uses three models to describe the relation between ‘ensouler’ and its ‘body’: the support/thing-supported, the controller/thing-controlled, and the principal/accessory relationship. The first model underwrites an ontological as well as an epistemological dependence between God and his body, i.e., the world, and the individual soul and its material body. The idea is that the thing supported (body/world) cannot exist, nor be understood, apart from its support (self/God). The ontological existence can be seen in the dependence of the body on the finite individual soul: when the soul leaves the body at death (as Hindus believe) the body disintegrates and ceases to exist. However, the dependence is not absolute, since the individual soul has no power to originate the body or avoid death; that power resides with Brahman or God (in liaison with the law of kāma). It is Brahman or God as the ontological support that is responsible for the cyclic origin, sustenance and destruction of the universe. Brahman, in this sense, is the material and the efficient cause of the world; it does not depend on any other thing. Again, epistemologically speaking, though the body exists to serve the purposes of the individual soul to ultimately achieve liberation, this dependence is not absolute. Brahman is the ultimate principle for the intelligibility of the world and all its beings; the world exists to serve the purpose of Brahman. The second, i.e., the controller/thing-controlled model at the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic level is invoked by Rāmānuja to ensure that free will (which is central to the theory of kāma) is not compromised in the presence of God, who is conceived of as omniscient and omnipotent. The Maitri Upaniṣad (II.6) refers to the finite individual soul as the ‘charioteer’ that guides and directs the material body to achieve its ends, just as the charioteer guides and directs the horses to reach his destination. At the macrocosmic level, God as the controller has the knowledge, will, and the power to achieve His ends, but insofar as His body is itself a conscious being, the controller cannot supersede the free will of the conscious agent; it is only in the case of unconscious beings that God is empowered to take full control. God as the guide and controller of the world (all beings) has full control over unconscious matter, but only partial control over conscious beings in that He can guide them through the scriptures and provide his grace, but He cannot take precedence over the delivery of the results ordained by the law of kāma. The last of the three models, the principal and its accessory, emphasizes that the accessory derives its value from the principal. Rāmānuja explains the principal/accessory relationship by using the metaphor of a master and a slave, with the qualification that it is reciprocally beneficial: the master has the best interests of the slave at heart, and the slave enjoys, understands, and surrenders completely to the master. This model of the relation between God and world captures the essence of the bhakti (devotion) tradition which was characteristic of the Vaishnavaite sect. The three models proposed by Rāmānuja are not meant to be independent, but are rather aimed at capturing various facets of the complex relationship between God, finite individual souls and material world.
Rāma-nuja does not aim to offer a rational theology; his theology is aimed at explaining the puzzling view that monism and polytheism can co-exist in harmony. This thesis is central to the Upaniṣads and has a tremendous influence on praxis. Rāma-nuja explicitly endorses Brahman as the ultimate reality but equates it with *saguna* Brahman which manifests itself as a supreme personal god Vishnu. Vishnu epitomises the One in many forms, in that he subsumes other divinities as his *avatārs* (earthly incarnations) and is the material and the efficient cause of the world. The view that God is the material and the efficient cause of the world is essential for *Vīṣṭādvaita* ontology, according to which the material world and the plurality of conscious selves is real and not merely an appearance (*māyā*) caused by ignorance (as for the Advaitešins).

This distinguishes his view from that of the Advaita Vedāntins and the Nyāya, but at the same time it speaks to the Upaniṣadic monism as well as the popular belief that the world is created by God as his *līla* (play or sport). According to Karl Potter, ‘[R]amanuja’s tradition can be said to represent one of the main arteries through which philosophy reached down to the masses, and it may be that *Vīṣṭādvaita* is today the most powerful philosophy in India in terms of numbers of adherents, whether they know themselves by that label or not’ (Potter 1963: 253).

To conclude, divinity in Hinduism is a complex phenomenon that draws on the compulsions of incorporating folk-form into intellectual tradition. The Nyāya rely exclusively on reason to offer a philosophically rigorous argument for the existence of God. It is no surprise that it fails to be rationally compelling, but it is striking that it does not stand up to cultural credibility: the monotheistic world-maker is far removed from the polytheistic and henotheistic practices. Rāma-nuja does better in providing a basis for folk-practices and forms of worship, but insofar as his theology relies on scripture and extensive use of metaphor, it fails to be philosophically satisfactory.

**Notes**

1 See Clooney (1999, p. 527).
2 A more complex version of this argument first appeared in Uddyotakara’s Varttika, and was later developed by famous Nyāya scholars like Vācaspati Miśra, Jayanta Bhatta, Udayana and Gangesa.
3 See Dasti (2011) and Patil (2009).
4 For an extensive summary of various ancient and contemporary versions of these arguments and their rebuttals see Oppy (2006a).