



Hanuman (left), Saraswati (middle), and Ganesha (right) are three of the Hindu deities that collectively represent the unity of Being.

A Progressive Hindu Approach to God

BY J.A. KASTURI, SUNITA VISWANATH, AMINTA KILAWAN, AND ROHAN NARINE

TRUTH IS ONE,” says the Rig Veda, one of the canonical sacred texts of Hinduism, “but the paths to it are many.” This idea that many paths can lead to a single truth finds expression in the democratic riot of local gods and goddesses within Hinduism—and the unity of Being that draws them together.

As founding members of an expressly progressive Hindu activist organization, we look deep within Hinduism’s philosophical and religious traditions to inform our understanding of God. In the scriptures of the Vedas and Upanishads, the line between philosophy and religion has always been faint. Four of the six schools of Hindu philosophy are materialistic (if not outright agnostic) systems, in that they do not strictly require the existence of an omniscient godhead standing over and above creation to validate their arguments. Hindu religious texts share their constellation of Vedic and Upanishadic concepts with the philosophers. In deeply spiritual language, these ancient systems of thought examine the contextual nature of human perception, the limitations of

language, and the humbling eternity of the universe. We live in an infinite and eternal universe, they say—and we inhabit it with always provisional knowledge and always feeble tools.

Another oft-quoted line from the Rig Veda says: “Whence all creation had its origin . . . only He knows. Or, perhaps even He does not know. Who can say?” In this way, it leads us toward a spiritual system that acknowledges human limitations and allows for doubt, rather than a system that offers absolute certainty. Becoming able to imagine a spiritual system that allows for doubt in turn enables us to imagine a universe and a God who can allow for diversity and dialogue.

Within the Hindu system, this takes the shape of a non-hierarchical riot of local gods and goddesses who supplement each other’s blessings. There is rarely a zero-sum game of spiritual authority in the Hindu universe of thought and practice. Ganesha is the remover of obstacles; Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge; Laxmi is the goddess of wealth; Hanuman is Rama’s loyal companion who embodies selflessness; and so on. Each deity has something to teach and a

J.A. KASTURI, SUNITA VISWANATH, AMINTA KILAWAN, and ROHAN NARINE are board members of Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus (sadhana.org).

domain to rule. The vibrant and complementary stories of these gods and goddesses, we are taught, can shape us into wholesome, well-rounded people.

Cacophonous Unity

The unity of Being—God, if you will—remains the same, our philosophers say, but each Hindu deity represents its local and diverse manifestations. As the Bhagavad Gita says, “When a man sees all the variety of things as existing in one, and all as emanating from that, then he achieves harmony with Brahman.” A similar idea appears in the ancient Indian collection of texts known as the Upanishads. “The world,” an Upanishadic verse reads, “is one family.” And that family, it says, includes even animals and flowers.

The divine light of Being therefore shines through each of us, as well. The traditional Hindu greeting *namaskaar* literally translates as, “I salute your form.” In a universe where people, gods, animals, and flowers inhabit the same existential space and emanate from the same divine source, there is no Other. The character closest to Satan in Hindu mythology—the demon Ravana in the epic Ramayana—is mourned by the gods for his lost potential and praised for his strength at the moment of his defeat. Upon his repentance, he is even welcomed into the heavens. In this way, the Ramayana enables us to imagine demons without demonization!

Nevertheless, Ravana was stopped and decisively defeated. His actionable sin was not disobedience but rather arrogance: the unrestrained pursuit of his ambition at the expense of others’ lives and livelihoods. Incapable of reining in his appetites, blinded by the *maya* (delusion) of his desires, he prevented a multitude from fulfilling their own *dharma*s (their roles, obligations, duties, and ways of life), while disrupting the balance and diversity of society and nature. A coalition army of men and gods brought his monopoly to an end, but they also had to recognize him as part of the same unity of Being.

Many Paths to the Same Truth

There is a well-known story in Indian mythology about six blind men who approach an elephant. “What is an elephant like?” they ask. As the story goes, one grabs the elephant’s leg and describes it as a pillar. Another touches its tail and describes it as a rope. A third feels its trunk and describes it as a hose. This story brings together several aspects of Hindu philosophy and religion. Human knowledge, as the Upanishads describe it, is limited, perspectival, contextual, and therefore best acquired through cooperation and experimentation. This is particularly so where a knowledge of the eternal divine is sought.

Truth may be one, but we will need many paths to it—with diversity, tolerance, and dialogue—if we seek to grasp its entirety. To deny the existence of such conceptions of God, or to deny the legitimacy of doubt and diversity in our

relationship with the divine, is to cede the space of spirituality to dogmatists who would seek to monopolize the diversity of Being for their own narrow purposes. This is the real idolatry—taking one’s immediate perspectival knowledge for the whole.

We named our progressive Hindu group Sadhana because these experiments toward God are as unique and diverse as the experiences of people themselves. The term *sadhana* is an ancient Sanskrit word defined variously as a personal path, a discipline, or a means to an end. In a religious context, it refers to the personal exercises—different for each individual—that the faithful undertake to discipline their mind and body before they can receive an awareness of the eternal divine. But in more common usage it refers simply to personal acts informed by—and disciplined by—an awareness of one’s larger, more global responsibilities. In both senses, it is a concept that connects the individual’s acts to the larger world of which they are an indelible part. As such, performing one’s personal sadhana is simultaneously politics, worship, activism, and pragmatism, depending on one’s perspective, and our work unites both cultural and religious Hindus.



“The character closest to Satan in Hindu mythology—the demon Ravana—is mourned by the gods for his lost potential,” the authors write. Here, Ravana fights with the winged demigod Jatayu.

Copyright of Tikkun is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.