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An Asian-American Reads the Īśavāsya Upaniṣad: First Steps Toward a Hindu Diaspora Theology of Liberation

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Abstract: The development of large Hindu communities around the globe calls Hindu theologians to reconsider the applicability of Hindu teachings to issues beyond their traditional cultural milieus. Where Hindus in South Asia may find the language of Hindu teaching attuned to their needs and experiences, there is a persistent disconnect for many Hindus who reside elsewhere. As such, theological reflection on the issues that Hindus face outside of South Asia has the potential to bring new insight and relevance to Hindu traditions. Reflecting upon selected verses from the Īśavāsya Upaniṣad, I aim to locate the theology of Advaita Vedānta in Hindu-American and Asian-American contexts. In addition, I put the works of Anantanand Rambachan, Peter Phan and James Cone into conversation in order to refine my understanding of liberation theology, and to dialogue with Christianity. Both of these tasks are important first steps in developing a Hindu diaspora theology of liberation.

For Hindus born and raised in the diaspora, there is often a deep disconnect between themselves and the teachings of various strands of Hindu tradition. This is because the vast majority of Hindu teaching is culturally located in the subcontinent. In his seminal work, A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One, Anantanand Rambachan articulates a Hindu theology that responds to social justice and addresses pervasive social issues in Hindu communities worldwide. ¹ This essay builds on Rambachan’s work through an exegesis of selected verses from the Īśavāsya Upaniṣad, placing Advaita Vedānta in the sociocultural context of Asian America. ² As a Hindu Asian-American of Indian descent, I write this article so that it can serve as a resource for Hindu leaders, laity and scholars alike, and help them foster conversations on social justice, engage in dialogue with Christian (and other) traditions, and inspire collaborative learning between marginal groups.

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Such theological reflection is particularly relevant in the face of rising Hindu nationalism in India, which exerts a pressure on Hindus abroad to identify with India, blurring the lines between national, religious and ethnic identities. The challenge for Hindu theologians then is to answer these questions: what does it mean to be Hindu in America and to be a Hindu minority? Can one be Hindu and also not Indian? How do Hindus participate in their own liberation from marginality and that of others? I foreground the lived experience of Asian Americans in my exegesis, which may serve as a starting point for Hindu theologians to confront these issues.

Context for theologies of liberation

The liberation theologian is motivated by a religious calling to engage with questions of inequality and injustice. In Rambachan’s words, “the interior life of holiness and piety must find outward expression in a passion for justice.” James Cone declares the Christian gospel to be sociopolitical in its outlook and import, speaking to the marginalization of the Black community. He calls the line drawn between religion and politics a conceit of the privileged, calling on Christians to not simply use religion to legitimate their existing social order. A Hindu theology of liberation for Asian-Americans will similarly speak to the experience of “in-betweenness” and reckon with their complex racial position, being self-conscious and critical of prejudice.

As a theologian of the Advaita Vedānta tradition, I identify non-duality as the principal axiom of its theology of liberation and the ontological equality of all creation. Insight into the union of the individual ātman and collective brahman enables mokṣa (liberation), freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth (samsāra). The universe is manifest through brahman’s power of māyā and is changeful and ephemeral, and in traditional Advaita teaching, without value. I argue for the theological reality of lived experience as māyā, as Rambachan states that jīvanmukti (liberation in life) results from wisdom that is transformative in one’s outlook on life and conduct and that does not dismiss worldly experience. The primary difficulty of doing Hindu liberation theology stems from the fact that most systematized traditions are articulated in the context of sannyāsa (renunciation). Students are traditionally initiated into their teachers’ lineages by giving up material possessions and their worldly relations and social obligations (such as those of family or community). For the grhastra (householder), the path to liberation will be different because they need to continue to attend to worldly affairs.

For the diaspora to find liberation in Advaita’s message of equality and enlightenment in radical oneness, Advaita must express itself in the local and particular, requiring a grhastra perspective. I look to Peter Phan’s work in Asian-American theology as an example, as he reflects on the Vietnamese experience of Catholicism and dialogues with other Asian religious traditions. Phan constructs Christ and God the Father’s relationship through the Confucian tradition of ancestor worship, conveying a message about gratitude to family and community. Such a creative reading of Jesus’ character is useful for constructing a Hindu diaspora theology. In 19th century Trinidad, for example, Hindu Indian laborers identified with Rāma’s experience of exile and derived religious meaning from it through performing Rāmlīla as village theatre.
This created a basis for the location of the practice of Hinduism outside of the subcontinent.

Liberation theology is also fundamentally concerned with a deep transformation of the whole society. Rambachan’s chapter on caste inequality makes the case that upper-caste Hindus bear primary responsibility for the plight of Dalits and other caste-oppressed groups. Hindu theology must speak to both the privileged and the marginalized alike. Cone’s critique of American Christianity similarly holds mainline white churches responsible for racial discrimination in the church. He calls into question whether the contemporary church emulates the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, placing his Black theology in critical conversation with mainstream doctrine.

A Hindu theology of liberation in Asian America must speak of Asian-Americans in their greater social contexts as such in order to address their liminal experience.

Phan poetically describes experience of liminality in Asian immigrant communities: “Being in-between is, paradoxically, being neither this nor that but also being both this and that.” This evokes the neti neti teaching of Advaita in the Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, which avoids categorizing brahman in absolute terms (2.3.1-6). Being between countries, cultures and races, the Asian-American feels existentially unrooted. This anxiety can be resolved through the identification of ātman with brahman, wherein liminality is embraced as a sacred quality of brahman and divisive thought is discarded. Situated in world-between, the diaspora experience can help fill the gaps in Advaita theology on modern issues.

**Exegesis**

1. Know that all this, whatever moves in this moving world, is enveloped by God. Therefore find your enjoyment in renunciation; do not covet what belongs to others.
2. Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years. If you live thus as a man, there is no way other by which karman (or deed) does not adhere to you.
3. Demoniatical, verily, are those worlds enveloped in blinding darkness and to them go after death those people who are the slayers of the self.

The Upaniṣad describes God as enveloping the world with the term īśavāsya, which indicates “being worn” or “covered” by the Lord. This may be read as the expressive power of brahman, establishing the non-separation of all objects within. Desire for objects arises from a perceived division between the self and object, and a sense of emptiness without it. This desire may be for wealth, status or belonging, all of which often figure greatly into the experience of Asian-American marginality. Asian immigrants in the United States seek to make a new life for themselves and their desire for socioeconomic mobility in their new country leads many of them to emphasize economic stability and prosperity as the primary measure of their success. This often precludes other measures of well-being, including a sense of belonging that their children often struggle to achieve. Because Advaita asserts a monistic vision of reality, the theme of “in-betweenness” for Asian-Americans becomes a central theological problem. The Upaniṣad teaches that seeking worth or truth in fleeting wealth and status (artha) is finite in value. The world which is enveloped by the Lord need not be longed for and belonging to it is not
qualified by the possession of things or identities.

The dignity of the jīva (the individual) lies not in artha, but in the eternal ātman which is one with the universal brahman. The near-exclusive pursuit of wealth among Asian-Americans perpetuates existential anguish (duḥkha), because it makes one’s dignity contingent on economic value. A blind seeking of desires results in continued rebirth and greater suffering, yet the mere relinquishing of worldly possessions does not imply the abandonment of desire. It is specifically the falsely aggrandizing desire for material possessions that blocks the knowledge of the union of ātman and brahman. But what is the role of Asian-American experience in framing this Advaita teaching?

We must see this predicament as a quest for social validation through wealth and inability to see one’s inherent worth. The duality of owner and owned causes suffering not only to the individual but all those around them. Rambachan states that while artha is a legitimate goal of life, it must be secondary to dharma, giving it an ethical dimension. The model minority myth stereotypes Asian immigrants as docile, head-down and politically subordinate, framed as the “good” minorities against Black and Hispanic people, who are vilified for their poverty and resistance. This places Asian-Americans in the middle of an intense racial polemic, asked to choose between conforming to a standard of whiteness or being relegated to a minoritized “Other”, pitting Asian-Americans against other minorities. The pursuit of artha fails to resolve the racialized tension in Asian-American life, as it cannot provide a sense of belonging. Conformation to either whiteness or “Asian-ness” is a duality which makes no room for hybridity. Rambachan characterizes ignorance as a limited construal of self, defined by separation or distinction from others. Dependence on artha is a part of this ignorance, as it denies the inherent worth of all beings and renders one’s existence in purely material terms. The model minority myth similarly makes out the failure of a minority person to achieve success or acceptance to be personal failure. Liberation is blocked through a mindless devotion to “works” (karmāni) that satisfy the image of a “good immigrant”. Karma can neither stain nor improve the ātman, which is infinite and eternal. A belief in the latent potential of ātman liberates the sādhaka from any compulsion to conform to a standard or reduce themselves.

4. The spirit is unmoving, one, swifter than the mind. The senses do not reach Them as They are ever ahead of them (the senses). Though They stand still, They outstrip those who run. In Them the all-pervading air supports the activities of beings.

5. It moves and It moves not; It is far and It is near; It is within all this and It is also outside all this.

The ātman’s transcendent yet immanent nature here further attests to how the ātman is the foundation of existence, which cannot be negated or diminished. It is bound neither by space nor time, just as the dignity of the Asian-American is not bound by nation, wealth or race. I see parallels in Cone’s characterization of Black Christian worship as a radically transformative “kairos-event” that re-affirms the worth of Black personhood. Both exclaim rather than merely hint at the nature of the all-pervading divinity, which is at the heart of brahmavidya. Being near and far, inside and outside, brahman as ātman...
effects grace and liberation as the content of awareness and liberating knowledge.

This is made evident in the example of the Rāmnāmis, a group of Dalit Hindus from Chhattisgarh, India who tattoo the name of Rāma on their own bodies and draw from their own version of the Rāmacaritamānas, repudiating the casteist and sexist passages of the original work by Tulsidās.  

The unrestrained ātman manifests in the defiance of Rāmnāmis against upper caste labels of impurity and the assertion of inherent dignity through Rāma. Their independent re-evaluation of the Rāmāyaṇa narrative to work out their experience is non-conforming and emphasizes the Upaniṣad’s teaching of ineffable agency that comes from ātman. This working within the space between resonates with Asian-American liminality, showing how brahman inhabits all lives and worlds as ātman.

Such reflection on the malleability of identity emphasizes the unique opportunity in diaspora theology. Questions like “where are you from?” or “what are you?” make the Asian-American self-conscious and in the absence of insight, will lead to anguish and self-doubt. Neither being white nor being Asian qualifies the worth of ātman, and the unique expression of brahman in the sādhaka’s in-betweenness and Asian-ness are intrinsically valuable. The dualistic notion that Asian-Americans have split loyalties renders them socially invisible. Similarly, Hindus are often expected implicitly to see India as their flag-bearer, and the emergence of Hindu nationalism has reinforced that idea. For the diaspora especially, clinging to India as the ground of Hindu identity erroneously ascribes ontological value to the state and runs contrary to Upaniṣad’s teaching of the freedom, ineffability and subtle nature of ātman. Asian-Americans cannot find the truth of ātman in the illusory nation-state. Just as ātman flies free, the Asian-American’s dignity is inborn and cannot be corrupted, reduced or qualified by anything.

The feeling of Asian-American belonging can be fruitfully understood as expressions of māyā, the fluid and dynamic power of brahman to create and express itself. In his commentary on the Brahma Sūtras, Śaṅkara steadfastly insists on the basis of the world in brahman and no other, making māyā intrinsic to it (Brahmsūtrabhāṣya 2.21). Śaṅkara’s argument finds resonance with Phan’s explanation of marginality as a condition:

To stress in-bothness means first of all affirming one's racial and cultural origins; for an Asian, this means affirming “yellowness,” like the dandelion. Being on the margin, however, prevents this affirmation of ethnicity from being exclusive, since the margin is where worlds merge.

Setting aside Phan’s use of “yellowness” to describe being Asian, the non-exclusivity of ethnic affirmation is important. Māyā evades categorization and restriction the same way brahman does, and is the source of all worldly experiences. The Asian-American experience of “in-betweenness” is one of the diverse expressions of māyā, which can be the basis for understanding Asian-American liminality as a liberating condition. Brahman is neither “this” nor “that”, while also being “both”, making the in-betweenness and “in-bothness” of the diaspora significant. This enables the Asian-American sādhaka to abandon the artha of social approbation of their identity, challenge structures which limit their existence and find true belonging through rootedness in brahman.
6. And he who sees all beings in his own self and his own self in all beings, he does not feel any revulsion by reason of such a view.

7. When, to one who knows, all beings have, verily, become one with his own self, then what delusion and what sorrow can be to him who has seen the oneness?

8. They have filled all; They are radiant, bodiless, invulnerable, devoid of sinews, pure, untouched by evil. They, the seer, thinker, all-pervading, self-existent have duly distributed through endless years the objects according to their natures.

Understanding Asian-Americans as one with brahmān’s expression through māyā is critical to the Upaniṣad’s teaching of oneness of all beings. These verses’ call to universal love and dignity becomes the cause of freedom from suffering and delusion of separation and being the “Other”. It empowers the Asian-American to resolve their existential anguish by realizing their connectedness to all beings and creation through the unity of ātman and brahmān. This illustrates a key difference in perspective between Advaita and Christianity, especially as seen in Cone’s work. The eighth verse describes brahmān as “radiant”, “untouched by evil”, and “self-existent”, a reality which defies description and ascription. The identity of brahmān and ātman indicates the presence of divinity in all things, in oppressed and oppressor alike. Ātman cannot be reduced to a mere body, because the awareness that is ātman, one with brahmān, suffuses all existence. Cone, in contrast, insists on the presence of Christ in the Black community and their marginal experience, which Advaita theology cannot embrace very easily. The boundlessness and infinity of brahmān validates all creation and necessarily implies that the oppressor cannot be neatly set aside from the oppressed.

For Asian-Americans, this is important because their racial position in the United States is complex. They are marginalized by white society and also complicit in the marginalization of other groups of color. Hindu-Americans must similarly reckon with marginality in American religious life while also contending with caste and gender inequality within Hindu spaces. As such, it is necessary to think of oppression as a pervasive ignorance that affects all of society. A “preferential option for the poor” cannot fully resolve the tensions of Asian-American positionality. Cone decries a “colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color.” For Advaita, the qualification of nirguṇa is a statement of the ineffability of brahmān; it is not that God cannot be black, but rather that God is not exclusively black. Divinity is not colorless, but rather is the latent expression of all colors. Note that Cone’s affirmation of Black humanity is not mutually exclusive of a critique of whiteness, which must imply the transformation of white people’s identity in the pursuit of liberation. In this context, the mutual reflection urged by the Upaniṣad becomes more meaningful.

The call of these verses is to engage in constant inquiry into the presence of brahmān in all beings, and how they are connected with the ātman within. Advaita soteriology is established on the premise that the sorrow of existential emptiness in worldly pursuits is common to all and that brahmavidya is universally liberating. Within the Advaita framework, the “preferential option for the poor” must also be complemented by a consideration of the bondage of the privileged and its implications for the liberation of all beings. In his discussion of C.S. Song’s
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Just as the oppressed and oppressor are mutually bound by ignorance and liberated by wisdom, the content of brahmavidya itself consists of insight into both. Vidya constitutes insight into the nature of reality but may lack an obvious connection to everyday life. Avidya is worldly knowledge but is superficial in understanding metaphysical truth. Let us consider that Advaita’s traditional motive for liberation is knowing the finitude of Vedic rites as a means to liberation, and the resolution of emptiness through the realization of brahman. The inadequacy of Vedic rites is broadly symbolic of the emptiness of conventional social mores and worldly life without contemplation of the ultimate. To explain this, Rambachan recalls the story of Nārada and Sanatkumāra in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, where Nārada goes to Sanatkumāra after having learned various traditional disciplines, yet still experiences suffering. Nārada’s desire for religious knowledge (vidya) is motivated and complemented by his suffering and awareness of his non-understanding of the world (avidya). One cannot appreciate the eternal and transcendent without a knowledge of transient and immanent. The divinity of brahman is ontologically indistinct from its manifestation through māyā, so it follows that insight into brahman must reflect upon worldly realities and divinity alike.

For Asian-Americans, the path to brahmavidya is not to simply deny their race as a fact of life or to see it as the only fact. It is to understand that race or ethnicity is constructed and fluid, being māyā. Brahman, through māyā, creates the universe yet is not bound by Their creation and entertains no inequality within Themselves. Bringing worldly experience into conversation with the revelation of the
Upaniṣad allows for a critical revaluation of one’s lived experience. Jīvanmukti is a life unfettered by ignorance of the self but is not a repudiation of the sādhaka’s experiences. Being Asian-American requires an acknowledgement of Asian-ness and Americanness, which reveals the presence of ātman which is neither yet also both. The theological meaning of diaspora is found in the world between, dwelling on the liminal and hybrid nature of ātman as brahman which is none other than the fact of all existence. The inquiry encouraged by the sixth and seventh verses brings avidya and vidya into mutual relief, culminating in brahmavidya and then mokṣa.

Conclusion

The vision of the diaspora is uniquely liberating because it lies at the crossroads of a global world. The Upaniṣad makes sense of inhabiting multiple worlds through a deep connection with brahman who also takes on a variety of forms as part of creation. For Advaita to express its theological vision in the service of universal liberation, it must be grounded in insight into the unique experiences of its various adherents. The Advaita theology of liberation which I have outlined here is but one step toward progress in Hindu and Advaita teaching. It is defined by the integration of seemingly disparate parts, making my theology of diaspora fundamentally a theology of re-integration. An Advaita theology of liberation understands divinity and humanity as fundamentally one and all-pervading, and holds out the promise of universal liberation and illumination of inherent dignity in all beings.

Notes


3 Rambachan, A Hindu Theology of Liberation, 5.


5 Ibid., 118.

6 Rambachan, A Hindu Theology of Liberation, 72.


8 Ibid, Kindle Location 3454.


10 Rambachan, A Hindu Theology of Liberation, 177.

11 Cone, Speaking the Truth, 114.

12 Phan, Christianity with an Asian Face, Kindle Location 318.

13 Radhakrishnan, “Īśa Upaniṣad”, 567-570.

14 Rambachan, A Hindu Theology of Liberation, 146.
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15 Rambachan, A Hindu Theology of Liberation, 72.
16 Radhakrishnan, “Īśa Upaniṣad”, 570-571.
17 Cone, Speaking the Truth, 19.
20 Phan, Christianity with an Asian Face, Kindle Location 3006.
23 Ibid., Kindle Location 1395.
25 Phan, Christianity with an Asian Face, Kindle Location 2283.
26 Radhakrishnan, “Īśa Upaniṣad”, 573-574.
27 Rambachan, A Hindu Theology of Liberation, 38.
29 Rambachan, A Hindu Theology of Liberation, 140-141.