

Atheism and Rationalism

Any general assessment of atheism and rationalism within “Hinduism” is confronted with manifold limitations not only given the associated historical depth, geographic range, linguistic plurality, cultural diversity, and (therefore) fuzzy borders of various Hindu traditions, but also due to the Christo-Occidental genealogy and conceptual ambiguities of the notions “atheism” and “rationalism.” In order to deal with these problems, only a selection of relevant issues are addressed here, including the problems of translating “atheism” and “rationalism,” the role of these and related notions in classical schools of thought, and their use in contemporary public discourse. The focus here is on Sanskrit-Hindi philosophical traditions, contemporary antireligious groups, and their respective texts – not on practices, bodily experiences, or aesthetics (Wilke & Moebus, 2011). Buddhist and Jain influence is only mentioned; likewise, the roles of rationalism and atheism within Islam, Neo-Hinduism, and other religious traditions on the subcontinent are not addressed.

Atheism

The notion “atheism,” derived from the classical Greek *a-* (not, without) and *theos* (god), is understood in several distinct ways in academic and popular discourse. The most important difference is while some interpret the “*a*” as indicating the absence of a belief in “*theos*,” others consider it a negation of the existence of “*theos*.” The notion “*theos*” is understood as referring to the Christian God, various personal or impersonal god(s) and goddesses, or any religious beliefs and practices. Each specific understanding of “atheism” faces serious conceptual difficulties. Atheism understood as the mere absence of a belief in a Christian God is so far-reaching that it does not serve any systematic purpose. Atheism understood as the absence of a belief in – or the negation of the existence of – god(s) implies the treacherous distinction between god(s) and (other) supernatural entities (nonempirical agents etc.). Finally, the understanding of atheism as a rejection of any kind of religious belief and related practices

is dependent on a specific conceptualization of “religion,” hence the respective conceptual difficulties. These problems are compounded if one attempts to apply the term “atheism” to the Hindu context.

Translation of “Atheism”

Synonyms of none of these meanings of “atheism” exist in the Sanskrit-Hindi tradition. Terms like *bhagavān*, *brahman*, *īśvara*, *paramātman*, *paramēśvara*, and so on are often translated loosely as “god.” There are “theistic” streams within the Hindu tradition, some speaking of monism, pantheism, panentheism, aequitheism, and homotheism (Michaels, 2004, 211), and in certain forms of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism streams of monotheism featuring a personal god, as for example with → Kṛṣṇa as the source of each of → Viṣṇu’s → *avatāras* (as *Svayam Bhagavān*). The different notions of “god(s)” in use are, however, polysemous, and there is no conceptual equivalent to their negation in the form of “a-theism.” For example, *īśvara* is used to indicate the power of various vedic gods in the *Rgveda*. It is conceptualized as an omnipotent, omniscient supreme god as well as the source of the universe, as found in *Śvetāśvataropaniṣad*, while other Hindu texts use → *Īśvara* as the name and form of the a-cosmic → *brahman*. Representatives of Advaita → Vedānta of → Śaṅkara, in particular, portrayed the *brahman* as an abstract, metaphysical absolute, as → *nirguṇa brahman* (i.e. *brahman* without qualities), rather than a god of actual religious devotion. In addition to the understanding of *brahman* as the one supreme, absolute being through which the entire universe came into being, it can also denote → liberation (*mokṣa*), truth, pure → consciousness, and/or the innermost self of every being (→ *ātman*). In classical Hindu traditions, there are half gods, ghosts, and demons, as well as deified natural forces (Agni, Indra, Sūrya, etc.), deified moral principles (Āditya, Mitra, Varuṇa, etc.), and divine powers with soteriological influence (such as → *tapas* for “ascetic heat” or *ṛta* for “truth”). In contemporary forms of Hinduism, a *bābā*, → *guru*, or → *sādhu* can be considered to be a “divine human being” or “godman.” The plethora of terms, often used differently in different Hindu

traditions over more than three millennia, have produced complex religious and academic debates (Michaels, 2004, ch. 8) that caution against any general “theo-logy.”

Further, the cosmological embeddedness of the various understandings of god(s) and the conceptualization and experiences of divine-human relationships in Hindu traditions varies considerably from the Christo-Occidental notion of a transcendent God. The worldly realm of human affairs is often not strictly separate from the realm of Hindu god(s); some humans are considered to be gods. And vice versa, the mundane nature of many gods is made clear in their being “fed” through → *pūjā* and → *yajña*, and to the extent that they can be considered dependent on the religious practices of the people. Moreover, according to many Hindu traditions, the highest goal of liberation (*mokṣa*) can only be reached by humans, not by god(s). Especially in some older Hindu traditions, the gods are themselves part of *māyā* and the cycle of rebirth (→ *saṃsāra*), and liberation takes place beyond the heavenly realms. Finally, for most religious and philosophical traditions, the existence of god(s) is a peripheral problem compared to the way in which one can achieve liberation, and larger parts of → Sāṃkhya and especially → Mīmāṃsā are “atheistic” in that sense. Depending on the religious tradition, there are various paths (*mārgas*), focusing on orthopraxis (*karmamārga*), devotion (*bhaktimārga*), and teaching (*jñānamārga*), as well as philosophical schools (*darśanas*), doctrines (*vādas*), and various traditions (→ *saṃpradāyas*) that guide religious practice, formulate religious goals, and eventually lead to liberation. The flourishing of religion does not necessarily depend on questions of whether god(s) exists. Therefore, highlighting a definite and dogmatic position with respect to the nature of god(s) can be misleading.

If one widens the focus to rejections of religious beliefs and practices, one could look upon the notion of *adharmā*, or the *nāstika* (nonvedic, heterodox) streams of Indian thought systems (*darśana*), as similar to common understandings of atheism. The translation of → *dharma* as “religion” in popular discourse, however, is highly deceptive. The meanings of *dharma* range from the cosmic order, to social justice, to duties specific to one’s “caste” (*varṇa*). Accordingly *adharmā* does not denote a general rejection of religion but, among other things, a breakdown in (cosmic) order, injustice, or the neglect of ritual

or social duties. *Nāstika* schools are “heterodox,” because they challenge vedic-upanishadic and later Brahmanic beliefs and practices. They comprise Buddhist and Jain philosophies – because of the focus on Hinduism, these are not discussed here despite mutual influence (see Dasgupta, 1957, 203) – and the → Lokāyata (or Cārvāka) tradition. Some scholars describe Lokāyata as an atheistic philosophy (Chattopadhyaya, 1969; Narisetti, 1985; Hiorth, 1995; Minois, 2000), and sometimes *nāstika* is translated as “atheism.” L.R. Joshi explicitly argues that Lokāyata is the only truly atheistic system of thought within Indian philosophy. He describes further schools of thought that are considered to be atheistic by others, such as Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā, Buddhism, and Jainism, as having “theistic tendencies” (Joshi, 1966, 189).

The history of Lokāyata is the subject of debate, since most of its original scriptures have been destroyed (an exception is the sceptical treatise *Tattvopaplavasimha*; see Franco, 1987). Its arguments must be reconstructed indirectly, through an interpretation of criticisms and summaries of mostly rival philosophical positions. On the one hand, there must have been very early on in ancient India people questioning the authority of ritual experts, beliefs, and practices concerning the existence of god(s), the soul, and an otherworld or afterlife (*paraloka*), along with the recompense for deeds and the resulting moral demands in this life (Dasgupta, 1957, 78; Gonda, 1960, 313–314). This can be inferred from the fact that many rival groups defended their doctrines against the “materialistic” challenges of scholars attributed to Lokāyata. There is however no evidence, on the other hand, of a coherent materialistic or skeptical philosophical system – featuring its own metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics – in India before the 6th century CE (Franco, 2011). Lokāyata did not survive as a distinct philosophical tradition in later centuries, and its influence on contemporary forms of Hinduism is hard to assess. Materialist arguments attributed to Lokāyata hold that sensory perception is the only means of gaining knowledge, negating on this basis the possibility of the existence of god(s), while skeptic arguments prefer to remain agnostic about such questions; hence one could derive different argumentative approaches that lead to two kinds of “atheism” in such cases. However, it might be more helpful here to not choose such a loaded and ambivalent term, but rather distinguish between materialist and skeptic arguments, as well as

anticlerical tendencies and rejections of specific religious beliefs and practices in Lokāyata (as well as in other schools).

Rationalism

The notion of “rationalism” is as problematic as “atheism,” since it opens up the semantic (mine) fields of “reason” and “rationality” and their related arguments ranging from classical Western philosophy, via the social sciences, to postcolonial theory. M. Weber noted that “rationalism is an historical concept which covers a whole world of different things” (Weber, 2002, 78), and L. Daston stressed the many aspects and the epistemic historicity of rationality in the West (Daston, 2001). For the sake of clarity, the following three arguments are separated here: (1) reason as a human faculty and its systematization in logic, (2) rationality as a constitutive part of a specific “mode of thought,” and (3) rationalism as a contemporary antireligious worldview. Before these different understandings can be discussed, the problems of translation must be addressed.

Translation of “Reason/Rationality/Rationalism”

As with “atheism,” there are no synonyms of “reason,” “rationality,” or “rationalism” in the Hindi-Sanskrit vocabulary, and different words have different connotations in different contexts and at different moments in time (Halbfass, 1988). The term *buddhi* is often translated as reason, but also as knowledge, understanding, intelligence, or intellect. Further, it is used for the general faculty of humans to classify data collected by the senses, and therefore as the fundamental basis for reason and logical thinking. Most influential was probably the use of *buddhi* as a technical term in Sāṃkhya philosophy. In Sāṃkhya the first three evolutes of → *prakṛti* (Jacobsen, 1999) are described as *ahaṃkāra* (faculty of self-consciousness/individuality), *manas* (recording faculty), and *buddhi* (faculty of judgment/determination). Thus not only is *buddhi* the intellectual or psychological faculty to discriminate objects presented to it by the other faculties of knowledge and perception, but it also decides courses of action. The specific connotations of *buddhi* within Sāṃkhya illustrate the problems of any straightforward translation and serves as an exemplary case for the limited discussions of the terms that follow.

Tarka is generally translated as reason, argument, logic, discussion, proof, contention, conjecture, reflection, refutation, and the making of inferences. The word is primarily used in contexts where competing positions are defended against other views. The focus here lies more on the identification and classification of irregularities, inconsistencies, or fallacies within scholarly debates, speculative doctrines, or philosophical systems. *Tarkavidyā* or *tarkaśāstra* is the science of inductive reasoning and thought. *Viveka* is translated as reason, discretion, discrimination, judgment, wisdom, investigation, and criticism. *Yukti* is translated as reasoning, union, combination of words, application, use, argument, and proof. *Hetu* not only refers to the middle term in an affirmative argument (syllogism) but also is translated as cause, premises, evidence, consequence, or a rational way of acquiring knowledge. *Haituka* is translated not only as having a cause or reason, but also as reasoner, rationalist, skeptic, heretic, and logician (someone versed in *hetuvidyā*). Other words for rationalist used today are *buddhivādī*, *buddhiprāmāṇvādī*, *tarkśīl*, *tarkvādī*, or *vivekvādī*. *Ānvīkṣikī* is the name for an investigative, reflective approach that examines beliefs acquired through observation and testimony by the means of correct knowledge (sometimes taken as synonymous with logic, → Nyāya, or the philosophical systems in general). *Hetuśāstra*, *ānvīkṣikī*, and *tarkavidyā* are at times used as synonyms for “free inquiry” or reasoning unrestricted by tradition – but *tarka* carries more pejorative connotations than the other two. Accordingly, *tārkika* is sometimes translated as a “sophist” who reasons for the sake of reasoning (and not for the interpretation of the → Vedas), and therefore critics also speak of *śuṣkatarka* (fruitless reasoning) and *kṣudratarka* (petty reasoning).

None of these terms is necessarily related to atheism in any of the meanings mentioned above. Rather, they can be seen as indispensable to find a way to god(s), to reason in a way not conflicting with the Vedas, to distinguish the eternal from the noneternal, as a requirement for the liberation of the self from the cycle of birth and rebirth, or for making otherwise soteriological progress. For most orthodox schools, compatibility of reasoning with the sacred tradition is of importance, since they consider systematic forms of reasoning, if used properly, as conducive to interpreting and thereby validating the sacred texts.

“Reason” as a Human Faculty and Its Systematization in Logic

“Reason” has been understood in the Western, Aristotelian tradition as one key characteristic that differentiates human beings from (other) animals. It has been claimed that similar distinctions must have also been part of popular thinking in ancient India (Dasgupta, 1957, 190–191; Chakrabarti, 1997, 260). Further, beings with reason have the possibility to reason, understood as taking some things to be true and inferring on this basis that other things are also true. Through this faculty, human beings decide which actions, beliefs, interpretations, or arguments are reasonable. Doing this in a systematic and consistent way and identifying the general conditions for doing so is called logic.

The roots of reasoning as logic in the different fields of aesthetics, agriculture, architecture, astronomy, grammar, law, mathematics, medicine, phonology, statecraft, and theology in India can be traced back to at least the 5th century BCE (Chakrabarti, 1997). During the first five hundred years of the Common Era, systematic engagement with rational argumentation was developed by adducing logical principles such as the principle of noncontradiction, the principle of excluded middle, and the principle of double negation. Out of the various *astika* Hindu schools of thought, the one most often associated with conceptualizing rational arguments, logic, and epistemology is the Nyāya school (on the origins of Nyāya and its relationship to early classical → Āyurveda, see Preisendanz, 2009). One of the most influential Brahmanical texts pertaining to inference is the *Nyāyasūtra* by Gautama (c. 2nd–3rd cents. CE).

Nyāya representatives most forcefully advocate *pramāṇa* as a method or theory for rational inquiry in epistemology and philosophical matters. This view denotes reflections on sources or causes of valid cognition, as well as on the means of validating or justifying knowledge or arguments. Contradictory positions, such as those of the “idealistic” tradition of Buddhist philosophers on the one hand and Nyāya scholars on the other, referred to *pramāṇa* to justify their claims, while skeptics flatly questioned the validity of “perception” as its precondition. The use of Indian logic was further developed by scholars such as Vasubandhu, Dignāga, Īśvarasena, and his student Dharmakīrti (c. 5th–7th cents. CE), whose thoughts on reason and argument were crucial for classical Indian philosophy (Tillemans, 1999).

“Rationality” as a Constitutive Part of a Specific Mode of Thought

Reflecting on this history, B.K. Matilal argued that the Indian logical tradition, featuring counterparts of the Aristotelian syllogism and the law of noncontradiction, is not a derivative of Western ideas but is entirely homegrown (Matilal, 1990, 1–8). This observation must be understood against the common depiction of India as the land of religion and spirituality, as opposed to logic, rationality, and scientific debate. Scholars like A. Sen, J.N. Mohanty, and J. Bronkhorst explicitly argue that this stereotype is wrong, that India has had a long tradition of rational debate. A. Sen argues that selective inattention has produced a substantial bias in the interpretation of Indian thought (Sen, 2005, 25). J.N. Mohanty describes philosophy in India as a supremely rational and critical enterprise. His underlying conception of rationality features at least the following components: (1) a theory of logic or of valid inference, (2) an account of what should count as evidence for or against conclusions, (3) a conception of what it is to know something, and (4) a theory of action, specifically of moral action (Mohanty, 1992, 4). J. Bronkhorst, however, defines “rationality” primarily as the readiness to accept criticism in all domains of human life, and therefore as the *sine qua non* of modern science. He goes on to argue that this kind of rationality is conspicuous by its absence in vedic literature, including the → Upaniṣads. In the debates recorded therein, no one is ever convinced by the arguments of his opponent, nor is the attempt made to bring this about (Bronkhorst, 1999). Other scholars also argue that apodictic statements were accepted without resistance since the Vedas were (and are) understood as revelation of the highest knowledge of ultimate truth and reality (Dasgupta, 1957, 41). J. Bronkhorst claims that this changed with respect to the classical Indian philosophers. J. Ganeri highlights the importance and impact of Kauṭilya (Ganeri, 2001), as does W. Halbfass by outlining that for Kauṭilya, *ānvīkṣikī*, *hetuvidyā*, and *tarkaśāstra* were incompatible or plainly opposed to the vedic tradition (Halbfass, 1988).

Beyond that, J. Bronkhorst proposes the more controversial hypothesis (see Turco, 2005) that both Indian and Western systematic philosophy derive one vital element – namely, rational inquiry and analysis as a key element of scholarly and scientific discourse – from a common source located in ancient Greece. Referring to the

Buddhist text *Milindapañha* (Questions of King Milinda; c. 1st cent. BCE), he claims that it is possible that Buddhists of northwest India adopted the willingness (or obligation) to use the method of rational debate in areas that were formerly the exclusive territory of tradition and religion. He finally claims that this vital element is absent everywhere else in the world and that the tradition of rational debate and inquiry has been able to establish itself independently in the history of mankind only once (Bronkhorst, 1999, 26).

With this line of argument, J. Bronkhorst continues a line of thought often attributed to M. Weber, namely, that certain developments essential to the development of modern science have unique roots in Western culture and spread from there around the world. M. Weber's main focus, however, was on the way in which processes of rationalization and intellectualization were related to the formation of a "puritan work ethic" and capitalism. Many scholars, often associated with postcolonial theory, challenged arguments proposing historical developments in the West as the global evaluative criterion for the progressive development of any kind of rationality as Eurocentric. D. Chakrabarty, for example, attempts to "provincialize Europe" by questioning "internalist histories of Europe" in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of rationality and modernity (Chakrabarty, 2000). Instead he highlights the role of such "historicism" in the formation of political modernity in the erstwhile European colonies and questions the positive association of rationality with scientific discourse by pointing to the "colonial hyper-rationalism" that modern science introduced into colonial India as an antidote to (Indian) religion (Chakrabarty, 1995).

The emphasis of the central role of intertheoretic competition and openness in the growth of (modern) science, as opposed to other "modes of thought," not only is crucial for modern rationalism (see below) but also was discussed in the "rationality debate" (Wilson, 1974; Lukes & Hollis, 1985). Debates about a specific "Indian way of thinking" (Ramanujan, 1990) and related issues continue in the social sciences to date.

"Rationalism" as a Contemporary Antireligious Worldview

The controversial claim that scientific rationalism has its roots in ancient Greece is shared by many contemporary atheists in the West. A standard

genealogy holds that atheism is rooted in naturalism, which is itself rooted in rationalism, both of which originated in ancient Greece. The origins of Western rationality are seen to mark the first chapter in the history of atheism, where atheism is part of a wider, progressive story about the development of human intellect as well as modern science. In this narrative, the identification of atheism and scientific progress is reinforced during the European Enlightenment (see Baggini, 2003, 78). This genealogy is partly challenged by contemporary atheists in India by highlighting their roots in ancient India – without denying their intellectual roots in antireligious movements in Europe and the United States from the 18th century to today. Indian rationalists advance this argument partly to object to the criticism, expressed primarily by Hindu nationalist groups, that the rationalists are "agents of the West" who merely continue the colonial imposition of "Western" ideas on India. The assessment of this claim is difficult. F. Hiorth argued that atheism was almost absent from Indian culture for more than two thousand years, even though the memory of Lokāyata was kept alive. According to him, only in the 19th century, and since then mostly as a result of Western influence, had atheism again started to raise its head in India (Hiorth, 1998, 6).

While the most influential Indian rationalist and atheist groups were founded in the mid-20th century, their direct forerunners can be traced to the social reform and anticaste movements in 19th-century India. A movement commonly called the "Indian Renaissance" stressed the importance of reason in establishing the truth of religious claims and practices attributed to the Vedas. This went hand in hand with a criticism of certain religious beliefs and practices, for example the rejection of "idol worship" as "idolatry." This movement focused not only on the religious but also on social reform, most prominently on the rejection of the caste system, as well as practices like "widow burning" (→ *sati*) and child marriage. The reformers drew on Indian religious and intellectual traditions as well as ideas from the West. Many of them spoke and wrote in English, and this facilitated further exchange with ideas and movements from England and other parts of Europe.

The most prominent figure in this regard is → Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), whose religiosity is generally described as not very different from mainstream Christian conceptualizations of God as the transcendent, immutable creator of

the universe. Comparable to “Deist” positions in 19th-century Europe, he argued against ideas of divine intervention and revelation and proposed observation of the natural world as a rational way to gain knowledge about God through studying his creation.

The fact that religious reformers claimed that Hindu religiosity could be considered equal to Christianity and Islam, that all religions have the same essence and are therefore essentially one – as for example argued by Ram Mohan Roy – probably fostered the formation of atheistic ideas from the West in India. The first self-declared atheist groups were to be found in centers of Indo-Western exchange at the time, cities like Madras (Chennai), Bombay (Mumbai), and Calcutta (Kolkata), where “infidel literature” from rationalist, secularist, and atheist groups from Great Britain was available. Initially, terms like “freethinker” and “secularists” were common; later most groups called themselves “rationalists,” arguing that rationalism implied atheism. Most of those behind the emergent rationalist and atheist movement in 20th-century India were well-educated Indian intellectuals with strong affinities to Western education and culture, while some had direct connections to the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) in London (Cooke, 2003, 281). The Rationalist Press Association defined rationalism as “the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a system of philosophy and ethics verifiable by experience and independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority” (Watts, 1980, 22).

One of the earliest such organizations was the Dev Samaj, which emerged in the second half of the 19th century. It was founded as a society in 1887 by Satya Nand Agnihotri (1850–1929), who was influenced by the religious, social, and educational reform movement → Brahmo Samaj (Hiorth, 1998, ch. 3). B. Cooke notes that “by 1895, having read the works of Herbert Spencer, Spencer’s American populariser John Fiske (1842–1901), and Henry Drummond, Agnihotri gave up theism altogether” (Cooke, 2006, 146). In recent times, the best-known spokesperson of the Deva Samajis has been the philosopher S.P. Kanai from Delhi University.

More influential than the Deva Samaj was the Self-Respect Movement founded in 1925 by Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973). Periyar was influenced by the American rationalist Robert Green Ingersoll and travelled to Russia, Germany,

and various other countries (Klimkeit, 1971). In his ideology, rationalism and its atheistic worldview became part of a larger nationalistic, antinorthern, anti-Brahmanic political struggle. Several political parties in contemporary Tamil Nadu trace their origins to the Self-Respect Movement.

Besides this political movement, there are many other categories of rationalist organizations in contemporary India – most of which are represented by the umbrella organization Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA). Member organizations of Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations are part of an international network of atheist organizations and the Atheist Center in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, for example, had organized several World Atheist Conferences. The Atheist Center was founded by the famous atheist leader G.R.R. Gora, whose books (e.g. 2007), together with the writings of many other famous Indian atheists and rationalists, provide a valuable impression of how atheism is understood and appropriated in contemporary India. Atheism, rationalism, and naturalism are seen as feeding into one another and into the rejection of everything supernatural (Bandiste, 1999, 11–17). G.R.R. Gora argues that for the Indian atheists, “theism” refers to all systems of belief that go beyond the limits of human beings and nature and is not at all limited to a Christian God: it “means believing that the universe and human life along with it are both governed by something transcendent.” G.R.R. Gora continues, “The depictions of god vary from [taking the form of] the wind, the rain, the sun, the moon, an extraordinarily courageous man, love, a personification of peace, to being the ultimate cause of the universe” (Gora, 2007, 17, 37). In this view, the “supernatural” includes virtually all beliefs and practices roughly labeled “religious,” ranging from the cosmologies of Brahmanical Hinduism, possession experiences, and witchcraft accusations to the adjustment of daily life to astrological prognosis, even though these beliefs and practices might be seen as quite “natural” by those who entertain them. For most Indian atheists, the underlying structure of religion(s) is the same everywhere, and they understand atheism as a rejection of this underlying structure, as opposed to a rejection of theism in general, or Christianity in particular (Quack, 2012). An uncontroversial use of the notions atheism and rationalism with respect to the rich history of Hindu traditions is therefore only pos-

sible with respect to those who use these terms to describe their worldview, namely, the contemporary rationalist and atheist movement of India. Finally, atheism and rationalism are not necessarily opposed to Hinduism. The founder of the *hindutva* movement, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), publicly announced his atheism and rationalism because “Hinduism” was more a marker of cultural and political identity to him (Kulkarni, 1979; Kumar, 1992; Godbole, 2004).

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