

Is Hinduism Polytheistic With 330 million Gods?

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Abstract

There is a large variation in estimates of how many Gods exist or are worshiped in Hinduism. The world is confused about this aspect of Hinduism and a clear answer would help them understand Hinduism better. A superior understanding can only be found in the source, in this case that source being the Hindu scriptures which at various places address the existence of Gods. Addressing both the singularity of one as well as the plurality of multiple. These contrasting views make it difficult to discern concrete information which can be identified by overlapping evidence. The question that therefore needs answering is how many Gods are there in Hinduism? Do Hindus worship many Gods? An approximate estimate of the number of Gods needs to be arrived upon. What also needs to be answered is if Hinduism can be identified as polytheistic? This paper will dive into researching the Vedas, the original source of Hinduism's philosophy and doctrines. It will then attempt to understand what the Vedas say about the number of Gods, and compare that to what is believed by practitioners and non-practitioners alike. This paper will also examine the intricacies of different inquiries made in regards to Hindu beliefs about Gods.

Full Paper

It is widely believed by many practitioners and non-practitioners alike, that Hinduism recommends and encourages the worship of many Gods. The Vedas themselves seem to describe multiple gods to be in existence. A recording of a conversation between Śākalya and Yājñavalkya, which is often referred to, brings up this plurality of gods existing. This trend of believing in multiple deities started to get established as various scriptures alluded to the same idea. Professor Julius Lipner, who has been studying Hinduism for a while, published various books which brought up some important arguments in regards to this topic. Lipner is one of the leading scholars who has contributed to the debate on this topic.

There is a large variation in estimates of how many Gods exist or are worshiped in Hinduism. This may not be significant to regular practitioners of Hinduism, but the rest of the world is confused about this aspect of Hinduism and a clear answer would help them understand Hinduism better. A better understanding can only be found in the source documents, in this case that source being the Hindu scriptures, which at various places address the existence of Gods. These sources known as the Vedas address both the singularity of one, as well as the plurality of multiple. These contrasting views make it difficult to discern concrete conclusions.

The question that therefore needs answering is how many Gods are there in Hinduism? Do Hindus worship many Gods? An approximate estimate of the number of Gods needs to be arrived upon. What also needs to be answered is if Hinduism can be identified as polytheistic, and if not, what other label (if any) best describes Hinduism? This paper will delve into researching Vedic sources, the original record of Hinduism's philosophy and doctrines. It will then attempt to understand what the Vedas say about the number of Gods, and compare that to what is believed by practitioners and non-practitioners alike.

Mention of Many Devatās in the Vedas

In the Ṛgveda (RV) and many other places in Hindu shāstra-s, there is a mention of 'Trayastrimati koṭi devatās'. There is often some confusion about what this term stands for. The confusion primarily arises from the misinterpretation of the Sanskrit word *Koṭi*. In Sanskrit, most words have multiple meanings, and their meaning depends on the context they are being used in. *Koṭi* can mean Crore (10 million) or can also mean 'exceptional' or 'unique' or a 'category'.

As an observation, one scholar has pointed out that in 725 CE, when Subhakarā-simha and I-Hsing translated the Mahāvairocana-sūtra into Chinese, they took sapta-koṭi-Buddha and translated it into 'Seven Supreme Buddhas', which stands for six predecessors and the one Gautama Buddha. They did not translate it to seven crore Buddhas. Even the Tibetan scholars who translated Sanskrit texts mentioning sapta-koṭi-Buddha into Tibetan, assigned the meaning of 'type', 'category' to the word *Koṭi*.

Besides, there are many places in shāstra-s where 33 devatās are mentioned and named. According to Maharishi Yājñavalkya in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 33 Devatāṣ comprise of 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas, 8 Vasus and an Indra and Prajāpati. The 33 devatāṣ collectively represent 'the six major elements, three levels of awareness, two forces of energy and matter, the one God and oneself'. To be fair, many later Vedic texts and sub-texts did go along with the interpretation which numbers the Gods at 330 million. As stated earlier, we believe the 33 Devatāṣ interpretation was the intended meaning, and is more accurate.

Following are some of the mentions of the 33 devatāṣ in Vedic literature.

- Destroyers of foes, gods, adored by Manu, who are three-and-thirty, and are thus hymned. (RV 8.30.2).
- Gods who are eleven in heaven; who are eleven on earth; and who are eleven dwelling with glory in mid-air; may you be pleased with our sacrifice.(RV 1.139.11)
- In thy mysterious place, O Pavamaṇa Soma, are all the Gods, the Thrice-Eleven. Ten on the fleecy height, themselves, self-prompted, and seven fresh rivers brighten and adorn thee (RV 9.92.41).
- Who out of many, tell me, is that Skambha He in whose body is contained all three-and-thirty Deities? (Atharvaveda (AV) 10.7.13).
- Verily the discriminating gods are givers of rewards to the offerer (of oblations); lord of red coursers, propitiated by our praises, bring hither the three and thirty divinities. (RV 1.45.2).
- May the three-and-thirty divinities sit down upon the sacred grass; may they accept (our offerings), and bestow upon us both (sorts of wealth) (RV 8.28.1).
- The cattle clothed itself in sevenfold strength, those among them that are sleek and those that are poor. The thirty-three gods attend them mayest thou, (O cattle), guide us to the heavenly world! (AV 1.12.3)
- Three and thirty he puts down; the gods are three and thirty; verily he wins the gods; verily also he piles up the fire with itself and with a body; he becomes with his body in yonder world, who knows thus (Yajurveda 5.4.1)

It is clear that the Vedas were referring to 33 entities, and not 330 million as is often claimed.

The 'Polytheistic' Definition

Some scholars have studied the application of the term Polytheism as stated in western literature, and realized that a key feature of Polytheism in its common usage, is a "naive belief in multiple, ontological distinct Gods. Per the definition, these distinct Gods do not recognize the divinity of the others. Right off the bat, based on these definitions Vedic theology clearly does not fit the definitions of polytheism.

Vedic philosophy professes non-duality and, the belief that all Devīs and Devatāṣ are embodiments of the Divine essence of the Universe, which is termed as Brahman. This unity of the divine is incompatible with the commonly accepted definition of polytheism. Per the Vedas, the divine essence permeates all beings, humans, animals, plants, and even the non-living. The human Ātman is of the same essence as the divine, and both the macrocosmic Sadguṇa (with characteristics or form) or Nirguṇa (without form or characteristics) Brahman are equated with the microcosmic inner self whose essence is the Ātman. This fact is driven home by the four Upanishadic based Mahāvākyas as follows:

- Tat Tvam Asi (तत् त्वम् असि) meaning “That you are” (Chandogya 6.8.7)
- Aham Brahmāsmi (अहम् ब्रह्मास्मि) meaning “I am Brahman” (Bṛhadāraṇyaka)
- Prajñānam Brahma (प्रज्ञानम् ब्रह्म) meaning “I am the highest state of wisdom.” (Aitareya 3.3)
- Ayam Ātmā Brahma (अयम् आत्मा ब्रह्म) meaning “One’s inner self (ātman) is Brahman” (Mandūkya 1.2)

The ‘Monotheistic’ Definition

It would be relevant to understand the connotations of believing in a ‘monotheistic’ philosophy, based on drawing inferences from the existing philosophies that declare themselves to fall under this category. It just so happens that these philosophies cover a large portion of the world population, and share some common traits. They are often referred to as the Abrahamic religions. Monotheists believe in One God, who is an exclusive entity that shuns, rejects, looks down upon, is jealous of, and decries all other forms of divinity. This God is “a ‘singularity, is opposed to others, and not a universality that embraces all”. As a result of this philosophical belief, monotheistic religions tend to be intolerant of other faiths, can be oppressive towards the followers of other religions, and use violence to suppress others’ voices. They have a history that is replete with the above hostile behavior towards other religions.

Hindu philosophical thought honors many paths and various levels of spiritual practice, depending on the individual and his status in Ātman's multi life journey towards *mokṣa*. The concept of the divine is varied in Hinduism, it can be formless or form based, external or internal. Or, one does not have to even deal with or believe in any aspect of the divine, and achieve *mokṣa* just by looking within (*Samkhya* philosophy within Hinduism). Thus, there can be many paths to attain the divine. The individual ātman can even merge with the divine or param-ātman (prime atman) post death, or even in this life, in this human birth - a concept that would be considered blasphemous in monotheistic religions. Believing in this aspect of *mokṣa* could even earn one a trip to the looney bin, if not the gallows in certain monotheistic societies.

Hindu philosophy is based on ‘discovering’ and ‘experiencing’ the truth and the divine nature of the Universal reality. It encourages its followers to take the guidance of an accomplished master in the form of a Guru, but the role of the master is merely to point us to the truth. We still have to experience, and discover the Supreme Reality by ourselves, we do not have to blindly believe in what the master, or even any Devatā has said.

Hindu thought accepts a multiplicity of deities at various levels, but regards them as embodiments and manifestations of the Ultimate Divine power. Hindu philosophy does not say there is one God, instead it tells us that everything is God. In this case, God is depicted as a unitary concept, and is considered the same as Universal consciousness, the attainment of which leads to infinite bliss or *ānanda*. So, Hinduism’s tenets do not come anywhere close to getting it labeled with the western definition of monotheism. Due to the inherent belief in the divinity of all ātman, and a lack of any exclusivity dictate in the philosophy, Hindus are not known for religious intolerance, or conquering lands

of other religions to spread its beliefs. The above approach can hardly be termed 'monotheistic', since that term means something else to the world, as discussed above.

What Definition Suits Vedic Philosophy or Hinduism

The existing western nomenclature with its defined parameters and boundaries between terms like monotheism, polytheism, and even pantheism, etc., are inadequate to define Hindu thought. Hindu philosophy does have elements of many of these categories, but none of them describe it accurately or precisely.

Some western scholars that try to pigeon hole Hindu philosophy into one of the western thought-based definitions, tend to use the category for Hinduism with a qualification. For example Diana Eck terms Hinduism as polytheistic, but then uses a qualification "The point here is that India's affirmation of Oneness is made in a context that affirms with equal vehemence the multitude of ways in which human beings have seen that Oneness and expressed their vision." Malhotra believes that the question of whether Hinduism polytheistic is an inadequate question in itself.

A position Paper by David Gray, brings up the structure of Hinduism as "lack[ing] the categories of polytheism to monotheism; use of these categories without consulting the very sophisticated theological views of the Hindu traditions represents a failure of understanding, a culturally chauvinistic insistence on applying cultural specific categories to an inappropriate context". Per Rajiv Malhotra, this also refers to a paper by Said, Edward titled Orientalism quoting Edwards to have said "orientalism," and harkens back to the colonial paradigm. He defines orientalism as a type of discourse characterized by "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient"; the uncritical use of terms such as "polytheism" in describing Indic traditions appears to be exactly this sort of discourse, a discourse more conducive to misunderstanding than understanding."

Some scholars have described Hindu thought as a tree, with multiple branches and leaves. The tree, with all its parts, is a manifestation of the seed. Being at various places in the tree is like being at various levels of understanding and progress in moving towards, and being one with the root which again is merely a manifestation of the seed (Brahman).

The Ultimate Reality known as Brahman (or the concept of 'God' if one were to use western parlance) in Hinduism is defined as Universal consciousness, that resides in all matter and in everything that is perceived and non-perceived, even including all deities. "Brahman is a collective name to refer to the ineffable truth of all the devatas combined." according to one point of view. Ramdass Lamb has explained the uniqueness of Hinduism, and the inability of traditional English terms that were coined to describe various theologies to be able to define Hinduism accurately.

Per Ramdass Lamb "The merging of polytheistic and monotheistic concepts in this way is unique to Hinduism. It allows people to believe in and pray to their own conceptualizations of the divine in whatever form they choose, while at the same time elevating all of them to their ultimate reality, which is the singular omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient divinity, who demands no allegiance, punishes no one for lack of belief, yet provides wisdom, comfort, compassion, and freedom to those who seek it."

Term that Best describes Vedic or Hindu Philosophy

Rajiv Malhotra suggests that the Sanskrit word '*tattvavadi-s*' can be used to describe Hindu philosophy. He explains that per Hindu shastra-s, *tattva* signifies the absolute reality, and is characterized as non-dual consciousness, also known as *advaya gnana*. According to him, the word *gnana* in the phrase

suggests that the human consciousness at its purest level is nothing but absolute reality itself. Many living spiritual masters have achieved this state of bliss or realization, in their current body/life. It is on the basis of their real-life experiences that they have shared the nature of reality and moksha, and hence this information has verifiability from diverse sources and is deemed reliable by scholars and practitioners of Hinduism. Rajiv Malhotra further points out that even though the absolute reality is one, this oneness does not mean that there is a lack of variety or multiplicity within it.

One can therefore, see how the oneness and the multiplicity co-existing at the same time, and the all-pervasive Ultimate Reality being inside everything in the Universe can confuse a scholar who is limited to mutually exclusive categories like Monotheism, Polytheism, Pantheism, etc.

Conclusion

Past categorization of Vedic philosophy into pigeon holes of western terms such as Monotheism, Polytheism, Pantheism etc., are incorrect, and lack any basis. It is wrong to map Hindu thought into any of these theistic categories, since none of them fully and accurately describe it. Vedic philosophy does not claim there is one 'God', unlike what many have claimed, especially in the last 200 years since Max Mueller pointed it out by incorrectly interpreting a key verse in the Rig Veda (1.164.46). Instead, the Vedas believe that everything is God.

A special category that properly describes Vedic philosophy needs to be created. A Sanskrit phrase is possibly the most accurate way to define Hinduism's character, and should be arrived upon. Scholars could deliberate on the subject and decide. A possible answer on how to categorize Hinduism, could be based on borrowing the definition from a book by Rajiv Malhotra on a Sanskrit topic. According to the book, the word '*tattvavādi*' may well be one way to categorize and define Hinduism. The term stands for those who believe in the 'absolute reality', which is considered in Vedic thought to be non-dual consciousness.

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